池田明季哉
[illustration] みれあ
オーバーライト
――ブリストルのゴースト
Overwrite
The ghost of Bristol
電撃文庫

オーバーライト
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Prologue
"On the Wall"
010
Chapter 1
"To the Pit"
015
Chapter 2
"For the Captain"
063
Chapter 3
"Over the Bridge"
095
Contents
Overwrite
The Ghost of Bristol
Chapter 4
"From the Stage"
177
Chapter 5
"By the Angel"
231
Epilogue
"Just with You"
293
design/arcane
graffiti/狐徒

George
ジョージ
Yoshi
ヨシ
Boo
ブーディシア
Lara
ララ
Aeon
アイオン

これは〝革命（レボリューション）〟よ
一週間後、この街は変わる
ララが天を上げた拳は、
勇気を奮い起こす。
ウィーアーブリストル。
叫び声はどこまでも大きくなる。

"Here I'm allowed
everything all of the time..."

—Radiohead. "Ideoteque"

Prologue: “On The Wall”

There are instances where the appearance of an existence previously undiscovered completely shakes up your beliefs. For example, a piece of art drawn on a city wall. Maybe even words thrown at you without any warning. Possibly…an encounter with someone. In my case, it was a ghost appearing in the thick fog.

“Where am I…?”

Put in simple terms, I was lost. Ending up a lost child despite being in university is an embarrassing situation to end up in, but the circumstances are what they are. After all—I stood on foreign ground. Going west from England’s London, you’ll reach a port city running along a river—Bristol. And I just began my studies abroad here at Bristol University. Hill roads built of stone moved up and down, interesting at every corner. Houses of brick were awkwardly squeezed in there like there was no care for infrastructure. Granted, it wasn’t anything unusual for the people who grew up in these parts, but as the Japanese that I am, this unfamiliar scenery was akin to a labyrinth.

I finished the formalities and then headed to the faculty connected to the university. That much was fine. The real predicament struck on my way home, as my phone had run out of battery. And naive as I was, I didn’t know that the concept of Japan’s convenience stores, which sell you about everything you could need on a daily basis, doesn’t exist here in England. Even worse, a dense fog had started to fill the streets. I had heard that this was a common phenomenon, but to encounter it immediately upon arriving was definitely a stroke of bad luck. Thus, ending up lost now was definitely something out of my control—The crux of the situation, however, is that making up excuses like this won’t allow me to find my way home any easier.

“Every single path looks the exact same as the previous one, too…”

Thinking I had found the right way, and proceeding for a moment, another unfamiliar sight opened up in front of me. Then again, the majority of the area here was unfamiliar to me. It was the natural course of events, so to speak, but it still didn't help in my bewildered state. I attempted to rationalize and took off my glasses to wipe them off, but as one would expect, it didn't suddenly reveal my back home.

Walking around further, I ended up completely confused as to where I was when I realized I had stumbled into a small pathway. The walls to my sides were made of brick, and at the end of it, I reached a dead end. Deep from within the fog—appeared a lion with blood dripping from its mouth.

Reflexively, I tried to protect myself, as my heart rate spiked. However, I quickly came to the realization that what I thought was a lion was just a drawing filling the brick wall ahead of me.

"Oh, geez…Just a drawing," I sighed in relief.

Now that I had gotten a closer look, it wasn't as realistic as I initially had assumed. But what led to my initial shock was the fact that it emitted some sort of weird energy. Call it passion, tenacity—Or maybe, a soul. I felt like it was pulling in, so I abided by my desires when I saw another silhouette appear inside the fog. Something was standing in front of the wall. It resembled a human person, looking up at the drawing of the lion.

They had long golden hair that reached down their back, the bottom part of their white skirt almost seeming translucent. What was I looking at? A fairy? An angel? Or maybe… a spirit? It felt like this being would vanish as quickly as it appeared. Watching them felt like my heart had been grasped, making it harder for me to breathe. And as I stood still in awe, that shadow raised its left hand—which held something. It looked like…a spray can? Seeing that, I sighed in relief. Because it helped me understand that the shadow in front of me wasn't anything supernatural, but a regular human being.

"Um, excuse me?"

My body finally allowed me to raise my voice. I simply wanted to ask for the right way out of this maze…But the shadow suddenly turned

around, and—something flew toward me.

“Wah?!”

I protected my body, as something bumped against my arm, falling onto the stone pavement. A clattering sound echoed through the fog. Soon after, I confirmed that this was created by the spray can the shadow held not even a moment ago. But when I raised my head, that shadow had disappeared. It had vanished without a trace. That should have been impossible, however, as this was a dead end, and yet…Maybe it was a ghost after all?

I crouched down and picked up the spray can at my feet. It was colored in silver and had the number 94 written on it.

Advertisement

Chapter 1: “To The Pit”

She always sits on the same chair—

The Manor Hall student residence I stayed at was located in the western area of Bristol. Stepping outside the gate, I headed down the Lower Clifton Hill road and its stone pavement. I walked over the pedestrian crossing which was pretty much meaningless since everybody disregarded the traffic light anyway, and made my way past the biggest building of Bristol University, the Wills Memorial Building, which resembled a church or a giant castle. Next, I entered the gentle slope of Park Row. The street had an antique shop offering genuine rifles made of dark wood and rusted metal, as well as an apparel store selling skateboards and sneakers. Crossing the street revealed a deteriorated long set of stairs. They supposedly have existed since the 14th century, given the name “Christmas Steps.” Walking down these for a bit, I encountered a bronze statue wearing a coat and sitting on a horse.

This place was close to the center of the town, which is also where you’d encounter the most activity in the area, and near that was a small game shop called **8-Bit World**. Shown inside the window were posters that had lost most of their color through ultraviolet rays years ago, with dusty plus toys of popular characters right next to them. I had let them be for a while, but today is the day I want to look after them properly. And for that, I had to call out to *her*. I heightened my resolve by pushing up my glasses once, and then opened the door.

“*Good morning*, Boudicia-san.”

The girl sat at the cash register on a cheap-looking chair, not giving me a response. Instead, she merely sent me a listless gaze. Her slant eyes and pupils colored in an ashen blue caught me, as her long blonde hair, tied up high into a ponytail, reflected the sunlight entering through the window. Each time she looks at me, I feel like a

small animal who happened to meet eyes with a beautiful lion in the Savanna who was just busy drinking some water. So that she wouldn't figure that out, I closed the shutter inside my heart, and then carefully spoke to her.

"Have you finished cleaning?"

"*Not yet.*"

This was our regular exchange. However, even though I ask this every single time, her meaning of "Not yet" did not equal the idea of "I'll do it now." I headed to the back of the store and grabbed a duster, returning to the front. She was resting her head on her palm at the cash register, simply spacing out into emptiness. I sighed faintly and then called out to her again while being faintly aware of how things would develop from now on.

"Won't you help me clean, Boudicia-san?"

Hearing my question, her sharp gaze pierced through me. She then narrowed her eyes as she opened her mouth, showing her white teeth.

"Huuuh? Why do you have to be so noisy about every small thing?" And she continued, sounding ready to bite my head off. "Are you my *mum* or something? Come back once you actually baked a pie for me, got it?"

"Pie, you say? I am fairly confident in my cooking skills, though," I returned a remark, realizing that this was the direction she came at me today.

"That's not what I mean. I swear, you *Japanese* have no *wit* at all."

"And going with that logic, the *British* should be bad at cleaning, no?"

"That makes no sense~"

"Both are *overgeneralizations*, don't you think?"

"…Yoshi. You seriously piss me off."

“Thank you very much for the *compliment*. Anyway, could you take care of the shelf, Boudicia-san?”

“Hell no. Also, I keep telling you. Boo is fine. Just Boo.”

She didn’t even bother listening to my plea for help and just threw her own personal *request* at me. In all fairness, she did say that before, I just didn’t comply because I thought it was a rather troublesome nickname.

“I personally think Boudicia is a wonderful name.”

“I’m telling you to stop!” She crossed her arms and pouted as she averted her face.

Seeing that childish gesture forced me to flash a wry smile, but if the person in question is so adamant about it, then I have no reason to not abide by their request.

“Anyway, Boo-san.”

“See, I knew you could do it.”

“Please take care of the dust on the shelves. I’ll handle the shop window.” I was about to walk away, but Boudicia didn’t seem to like that.

“I can handle the shop window, too. That seems a lot easier.”

“I was actually planning on replacing the display…Do you know how to do that, Boo-san?”

Despite being my senior at work, she actually is way less informed about this shop and how everything works.

“All right, all right. I’ll get the shelves done, geez!” Boudicia grumbled as she stretched out her left hand, grabbing the duster.

Surprisingly enough, her dominant hand is left. And after she awkwardly placed a small stepladder in front of the shelf, she stood on it and violently moved her left hand from one side to the other, blowing the dust off like a storm. Personally, I wish she’d be a bit

more thorough and careful during her work, but if I were to say that to her face, she'd probably throw the duster right at my face, so I decided to let bygones be bygones.

Not to mention that I was already fairly used to exchanges like these. At first, I was distraught at the fact she possessed such a harsh tone despite her delicate outer appearance, but each conversation with her acted as good practice for me, too, and it's definitely thanks to her that I managed to get much better at English over the past month. Granted, some wasn't voluntary from my side, but it's a blessing in disguise.

I got accepted to Bristol University and moved to the dorm here at the beginning of September. Before that, I had been studying at a university in Japan, but I decided to leave my home at least once to study overseas. The fact I was even accepted here is nothing short of a miracle. Well, unlike Japan's universities, the real work only started after that fact.

The biggest adversary I had to face was my financial situation. Luckily, I received a scholarship that would pay for most of my money during my time here, but I still wished to work a bit on the side to stabilize my finances. Eventually, I ran into this game shop here. Granted, working immediately after moving overseas brought a lot of trouble with it, but seeing a lot of characters here that I had spotted even back in Japan allowed me to find a connection to settle in better.

Even the very first time I opened the door to this shop, Boudicia sat at the register. Her glittering hair and long eyelashes, paired with her clear eyes and small face, as well as surprisingly long limbs, I assumed I had encountered an actress you'd seen staring in a movie, but imagine my surprise when she first opened her mouth.

By the way, the reason I didn't take her for a model at first is because of the oversized hoodie she wore, open at the front, and the black sports tights covering her legs. Paired with her worn and large sneakers, it all created a rough feeling, which even allowed an amateur like me to realize she wasn't particularly concerned with her outfit.

That being said, speaking with pure logic, there's still a good chance she might have a profession along those lines. After all, despite having worked here for about a month now, I still don't know a thing about her. Since she's usually here when it is time for my shift, I figure that this is probably where she works most of the time. In terms of her age, it's usually hard to tell with women, especially with English women like her, but I just selfishly assume she should be around the same age as me.

"What are you staring at?"

"Ah, sorry. I was just thinking that if you don't pick up the figurines, it'll be hard to get all the dust off there," I commented on something else entirely to ensure she wouldn't find out I was staring at her that entire time.

"Will you stop complaining about every small thing? I was gonna do that right now!" She grumbled, but her voice sounded so clear and transparent.

Even when she screamed or complained, she never sounded hoarse. It's really weird, and I think about it each time I hear it. And even as she hissed at me, she continued to lift the figurines with her right hand to clean under them.

"Ah, wah, wah!"

However, she happened to bump into the shelf with her hand, which sent the figurine spiraling into the air. She juggled it once, twice, and even three times until she finally grasped it with her hand, only to lose balance with her whole body, falling to the ground.

"Eeek?!"

I wanted to catch her, but it was already too late for me to react, as she had landed on the ground with the figurine, creating a large rumbling sound.

"Are you okay, Boo-san?"

"This is your fault, you hear?! All because you forced me to clean!"

“That’s a bit of a leap in logic, don’t you think?”

Boudicia’s white, possibly even translucent, skin turned red, as she roared in unreasonable anger. Just when you think she’s a hottie, she’s got a nasty personality, and yet she’s this clumsy all the time, which is why she often lets things drop to the ground, including her own body. Maybe she feared that, which is why she wanted to push the cleaning of the shelves onto me. Connecting the dots there, I reflected on my attitude. Then again, cleaning was necessary.

Either way, I’m just glad she’s not hurt too badly. I offered my hand to her, who was still sitting on the ground, but she purposefully ignored it and got up with her own strength. Looking at her like this, she looked less like a lion and more like a prideful stray cat. Including the mysterious air she gave off. The reason I’ve been taking a lot of shifts lately here at work despite my busy university schedule was to check her out during work. It’s like taking a detour on your way home from school to visit that stray cat you regularly meet. And since my hand had no other place to go, I instead opted to pick up the figurine. And with that as a signal, the bell attached to the door rang with a loud ding.

“*Hey, welcome*…Ah, George-san.”

“Hey there, Yoshi-kun. Good morning.”

I greeted the new customer with a warm smile and gentle tone, as George gently raised his hand to wave at me.

“Yuck, more trouble’s arrived. Why don’t you turn right and go back to where you came from, you parsley bastard.”

“What a greeting that is, Roasted Beef-chan.”

“Who’s meat, huh? I’ll boil you alive.”

George is a regular here at the store. Then again, he would stop by a lot, only to not buy anything in the end, simply engaging in banter like this with Boudicia. He was a tall man wearing a suit with qualitative material, possessing the outer appearance of an English gentleman, while wearing a rain jacket on top to not completely

overdo his look, still possessing a stylish fashion sense. With his gentle tone and dignified look, he resembled a large dog. In that context, he's the exact opposite of Boudicia, too. And yet, they did resemble each other in some parts, which is why I'd immediately buy into any hypothesis that he could be her older brother. Boudicia always hisses when he would come to visit, but through George, I could learn a lot about the UK, so having him stop by was one of the joys of working here.

"Why are there only idiots around me…"

"Have you never read Cinderella? The nasty older sisters never get to marry the prince."

Boudicia's comment held quite the punch, but George's retort was as sharp as a knife. Looking at them like this reminded me of a couple of friends who'd known each other for a long time or especially close acquaintances.

"Seems like you're not as clever as you think. The big bad wolf's gonna get blasted and slaughtered by Akazukin[1]." Boudicia grinned as she put on the hood of her red hoodie, showing her long nails.

The way I see it, this is a mixture of a werewolf and Akazukin, but what do I know?

"Was it such a violent story? I can hardly remember."

"It sure was. That's why her hood is red."

"I highly doubt that was it," I retorted.

"On a different note, there's something that caught my attention just now." George pointed at the door behind him with his thumb. "There's something drawn on the glass outside."

"Wait, *really*?"

"*Really*."

I quickly rushed out of the store and checked the window. Drawings? That should be impossible. I just got here, and I didn't find

anything…However, George was absolutely right. On the bottom right part of the glass, I spotted a skeleton drawn onto the surface with a bluish-green color. It was wearing a large hat as it stood on a boat, holding something that looked like a spear. Although it wasn't too clear, the expression it had made it look like it was smiling. Size-wise, it could probably barely fit into my palm. And yet, it was oddly detailed.

"When was this…" I crouched down to get a closer look at the drawing when I heard the sound of the door opening to the left of me, and quite violently, too.

"This, huh? Damn bastards looking down on us." Boudicia bent her knees like me to inspect the drawing, as she stretched out her left hand to knock on the part of the glass with the drawing.

I thought she'd be furious, but she was much more composed than I would have expected. But since she brought her face closer and touched my shoulder, my heart skipped a beat and I slid over half a step to the right.

"Just what's going on with this?"

It was truly odd. It must have appeared in the short time we were cleaning inside the store. Logically speaking, this should be impossible. And even more surprising was the fact that Boudicia stared at me. Her long and golden eyelashes moved up and down a few times.

"…Well, my bad."

"Huh?"

"You must have been bothered by the fact I said you guys had no *wit*, right? Being diligent is who you are, right? I don't wanna be that gal, but that *joke* was hella lame, so no more, 'kay? Sorry."

I had no clue what she was referring to.

"Um…That wasn't supposed to be a joke."

"This is just your typical graffiti, right?"

“Graffiti…”

I couldn’t connect that word to any mental image and was forced to just return it like a parrot.

“…*Seriously*? You’ve never seen graffiti? No way, right?”

“I feel like I’ve heard the term before…” I answered honestly, but Boudicia still struggled to accept that.

“We’ve got a whole lot around here, nah?! You get a spray can and then…pssssh and all that!”

I thought about it for a moment but remained clueless.

“Roasted Beef-chan, that explanation won’t help dear Yoshi-kun much.”

I heard a familiar voice and looked past Boudicia's shoulder when I saw George stepping outside the store with a smile.

"No way he never saw any up to this point!" Boudicia stood up as her golden hair shook with vigor.

However, George couldn't agree.

“If you don’t pay particular attention to it, I could see him not spotting it. In fact, I’m quite delighted he’s showing so much interest. Listen up, Yoshi-kun, here’s a lesson on graffiti.”

George seemed happy like a fish racing through the water as he began vividly detailing the idea behind graffiti. It basically referred to art that is drawn on the city walls and other buildings using spray or pens. At first, it was simply regarded as mere doodles and drawings. During the 70s, it became popular and eventually reached its peak in the 90s. It began with New York as the center and then spread throughout the world. Originally, it was seen as part of hip-hop culture, but at the same time, it was also regarded as a crime—vandalism. And all I was told felt like a new world opened up for me.

“Graffiti started by writing your own nickname, and the letters of such became more and more flashy. That’s why you don’t use the verb *draw* or *paint*, but *write* when referring to it. And the people who create graffiti are called *writers*, too. And if you want to be respectful towards the art, you say they’re graffiti artists.”

Being told knowledge and detail on the level of an encyclopedia, I was utterly bewildered.

“I can tell you really like graffiti, George-san.”

“Not just graffiti, but art in general. Ever since I was a little boy. The Art Museum in Bristol is like my second home.”

“What a moldy house you live in.”

“You shouldn’t make fun of the history consisting of the pursuit of art. Show your respect.”

“Anyway, Bristol’s regarded as the holy ground of graffiti,” Boudicia ignored George’s comment, put one hand on her hip, and puffed out her chest.

George didn’t disagree with Boudicia’s comment and continued with a nod.

“There’s plenty of cities that are famous for their graffiti. London is no exception, and you could also name Paris, Melbourne, as well as

the remains of the Berlin Wall. But Bristol gathers artists who are most famous across the world. In that sense, this city is extremely special."

"Most famous…"

"Ah, yeah. You mean Banksy, right?" Seeing me struggling to think of anybody, Boudicia shook her head as she opened her arms.

"Seems like that didn't ring a bell."

"Well…"

George saw me still struggling to connect anything, as he grinned and delivered an explanation.

"We're talking about Banksy. He's an elusive and masked artist. Nobody knows his true identity, and his entire existence is shrouded in mystery. All we know is that he's from Bristol. And yet, his works are highly valued around the world. As part of one of the world's biggest art auctions, Sotheby's, one of his works was sold. Wanna guess how much? One million pounds."

"A million…He's still alive, isn't he?"

Putting that into the Japanese currency, you'd be looking at 150 million yen. I started to feel dizzy imagining that sheer number.

"That's right. That is exactly what makes Banksy such an outstanding individual. He is a genius that creates absolute value like this out of nowhere. But the most amazing part has yet to come. Right after the successful bid, his work was—"

"Yeah, yeah. We get it. You really love Banksy, George."

Boudicia seemed like she was tired of all this exposition. It was my first time hearing this story, but from the looks of it, she was probably told the same thing countless times over.

"Of course! Banksy's impact is one of the rarest in the history of the arts. He stands on the same level as Andy Warhol or Marcel Duchamp. Speaking in terms of Bristol origin, he could call Damien

Hirst his friend. I consider it my pride and joy to be born in the same city as him."

Thinking that such an amazing person was living in the same city I stood in…felt quite odd.

"Any chance that Banksy could have done this?" I pointed at the graffiti and asked.

"Nah, doubt it. He doesn't live around here anymore. Though, I hear he's still writing here in Bristol from time to time."

I had expected that answer, but even if this was done by Banksy, I probably wouldn't have been able to tell either way.

"Still, what a bother that they had to place it right there."

"And I personally don't consider this to have so much artistic value." George showed a dejected expression as he shrugged.

"You can say that again. I'd love to have them erase it, but oh well…"

Something clicked in my head when I heard Boudicia's statement. Like something was off, almost.

"Boo-san."

"What?"

"Do you happen to know…who did this?"

"Wha…" She looked at me in utter disbelief.

Seeing that reaction, I half-guessed that I was on the right track.

"I was just thinking of how to erase it. Since it seemed like an accident, or even misfortune, I didn't even bother to consider who could have done it. However, you were different. You said that you wanted the person in question to erase it. That would mean you could have a means of reaching the person who put this here."

“Damn it…Bothered about the smallest detail. Who are you, some critics of loose articles?”

Boudicia’s insult had a good hit for once, leaving George laughing.

“You’re a sharp one, Yoshi-kun! It’s your loss, Boo. You gotta tell him now, right?”

“What’s going on, Boo-san? Who did it?” I asked, too.

Could you really identify the person who put down such a small graffiti like this?

“Gaaaah, I swear! Fine…But, just a heads-up, I’m not in the clear about everything.” Boudicia reluctantly pointed at the graffiti. “Take a good look. Normally, you write graffiti with regular spray, but this one didn’t spray it directly. It’s too small for that.”

“That makes sense.” I fixed my glasses and put my face closer.

“Look, there. It’s a bit out of focus here. They probably just pre-cut paper and then ran the spray over it. You call that a stencil.”

“I see. That would allow them to write it in an instant.”

The answer is always simple. And because it was so simple, it surprised me. I would have never even thought of that.

“Most graffiti is regarded as a crime, y’know? You don’t have time to leisurely spray the entire wall. There’s a lot of techniques circulating that would allow quick writing.”

That is true. The person who gets their property full of graffiti definitely won’t enjoy it. It’s practically *vandalism*. Then, Boudicia pushed her face closer to the skeleton graffiti.

“And this guy ain’t half bad. Looking at this, he can write at least 100, easily. It’s rare to see someone this talented here in Bristol, even. But there are a few messy places where the paint isn’t equal to the rest. It doesn’t match the actual quality of the blueprint. I doubt they’d usually be relying on stencils. And there, this *matt pressure*. Probably Montana. And even if that’s a normal choice, this beryl

green caught me off-guard. Usually, you'd write stencils in black or red. There must be a reason they chose this color."

The influx of information was too much for my brain to handle. I thought I was ready, but around half of it was just completely lost on me. But, that last part caught my attention.

"A reason?"

"The person doing this must have gotten the stencil from a third party and was ordered to do it in this color."

"So we're dealing with a group?"

"Yeah. Probably a group of two. One pressed down the stencil and the other sprayed over it. That'll allow them to write it quickly."

That made sense. But to think even this much could be deducted from a simple graffiti.

"That's amazing, Boo-san. You're like Sherlock Holmes."

Since we're present in the UK, I figured that the protagonist of the English novel I had read before would match the situation perfectly.

"H-Holmes? Ah, c'mon, everybody would be able to tell this much…" Boudicia said as she stuffed her right hand into her pocket, playing with the string of her hoodie using her left hand.

Seeing her tear her gaze away with a bit of a pout, I was genuinely impressed. Didn't expect I'd see that of her today.

"If Boo's Holmes, then Yoshi-kun must be Watson. You've crossed the level of being a *Consultant Detective*, and more of a *Graffiti Detective*. Not a bad duo you two are." George seemed oddly fulfilled, as he pointed at Boudicia and then myself.

Leaving aside the debate if I have enough of a presence like Watson does, I have to agree with his assessment of Boudicia and her ability to reason.

"And…who did it?"

“So persistent…Like I said, I haven’t figured out everything yet.”

“Don’t think that will work on me. You must have some kind of method to clear that up, right?”

“Why are you so adamant about this?!”

Because I’m curious about who did this. And more than that…I wanted to figure out just who exactly this rude sleazeball but also beauty of a senior this girl here truly is.

“Just tell me.”

“Gaaah, I get it! I get it!” Boudicia raised both her hands as she said so.

That gesture probably conveyed both *I give up* and *I’m tired of this*.

“Well, can’t have those bastards look down on me. Putting them in their place won’t hurt.”

“Then…”

“Yeah. I’m going over to give them a piece of my mind.”

Internally, I was dancing in excitement.

“With that decided, I guess you two will have to head out right now,” George said, smiling as if he had just obtained a new toy.

“But we’re still on our shift…”

“No adaptability, eh? When in the UK, you do as in the UK.”

Boudicia entered the store and grabbed a random pan and paper. She then wrote something on it, stepped outside, and put it on the door with tape.

“This should do the trick.”

The letters on the paper were written with quite eccentric writing.

“…What does it say?”

“Huh? You can read, right?!”

“Well…”

I approached the paper, but I had no clue what it was. The dirtiness of the letters was ruining all readability. I know that English people aren’t too concerned with their handwriting, but this is a bit too rough around the edges.”

“It reads ‘*Out for Lunch! Be back in an hour!’* if I had to guess.”

As Boudicia was greatly hurt by my inability to read her handwriting, George thankfully translated it for me. And truth be told, I had seen something similar like this before, but to think it was just a convenient excuse…Of course, I doubt this is the same for every single case, but that at least explains why some places remained closed even when I came back an hour later. Also, what’s even the point of putting up that paper if people can’t even read it? I was bewildered about the many holes in this idea, but Boudicia nonchalantly locked the door to the shop with her key.

“What are you spacing out for? Let’s go, Yoshi.”

“I have to say…Seeing Boo listen to others and act on her own. What a time we live in.” George tried to hold back his laughter as he looked at her and then at me.

“This isn’t about me. It’s about Yoshi not letting people be and listening to them.”

“And yet, I’m very attentive to every single thing you’ve been saying for a while.”

“See?! This is exactly what I mean!”

“Well…if you found them, I’d like to be filled in. But more importantly, *good luck*.” George waved his hand at us as he saw us off.

Boudicia continued to grumble for a bit longer as she started walking. I also raised my pace so that I wouldn’t be left alone by her. Just where were we heading anyway? What’s going to happen now? So

many questions, and yet my heart was racing in excitement. It felt like an adventure. Like a tour guide was introducing me to a world I had never known. And with my excitement at an all-time high, I chased after Boudicia's back.

*

"Um, Boo-san?"

"What?"

"This is not a good idea. Let's turn back."

I followed Boudicia in utter silence for the past twenty minutes, until we reached an art supply store. That being said, it wasn't an outdated or worn-down shop. Rather, you could easily see inside the store from the large glass windows, especially the bookshelves colored in bright colors to create a stylish atmosphere. The billboard at the front entrance had text written on it.

Let's fill this town with artists.

The message written there stood out the most among all the other shops around. It was a strong and assertive line. I doubted that this was the name of the store, but the board was buried with that same line. Boudicia didn't pay much attention to it and just entered the front door, so I followed.

The air inside the store had a distinct smell of color. The shelves were filled with goods and supplies I had never seen before. And when I think that each of these has a special use, I was overwhelmed. However, I happened to spot one familiar sight in this foreign territory—A spray can that had 94 written on it.

It's the same spray can that I found that day. The only difference was the amount. The silver canister had the same number written on it, joined by countless other cans on the same bookshelf. The sheer amount felt like I was looking at a wall. But taking a closer look, the top part of the cans had different colors.

"Is this…"

“Hm? It’s spray paint. Used for graffiti.”

Boudicia must have seen me stare at this odd sight, as she explained.

“How many are there?”

“189 colors.”

“…What?” My mouth was agape as I couldn’t process that sheer number.

All I knew were the basic 24 colors for the crayons I used as a child. I don’t even think I could name half of those anymore.”

“Strictly speaking, it’s 94. But Montana’s got hardcore or water-based ones. Over there are Belton and Flame, too.”

I had no idea what she was even referring to, but it was plenty to make me understand the sheer selection of spray paint there was in the world. Meanwhile, Boudicia headed to the cash register without hesitation. Looking over, a sturdy man stood there between the aforementioned cash register and the shelves buried with spray paint, and I did the same…But that’s where I told her we should turn back.

“*Even* you have no chance of beating him, Boo-san. There’s always an absolute difference in body weight when engaging in a physical fight like…”

“Calm down. Also, what is that *even* supposed to mean? Do you think of me as some wrestler?”

Rather, a wild beast. But of course, I didn’t dare say that out loud. And as we were having that exchange, the man in sandals spotted us and spoke up.

“…Boudicia? Now that’s a surprise. Getting to see your face is quite the delight.”

The voice coming from the man turned out to be much more gentle than I could have imagined, deeply reverberating inside of me. It didn’t seem too surprising to him, to be honest. And the way he called her made it clear that they knew each other.

“Oh zip it, Aeon. Your body’s as freaky as always. Also, I bet you haven’t actually forgotten that I ask you to not call me by my name, right?” Boudicia bit back as she would with about anybody.

But compared to when she spoke to me or George, her voice seemed a lot more gentle.

“I think it suits you quite well.”

“Wanna fight, punk?”

“*Negative.* I was just trying to resolve things peacefully.”

The man called Aeon let out a faint laugh without his eyebrows moving even an inch. The contrast between his darker skin and white teeth was almost dazzling. Maybe it was because of the absolute difference in size between the two of us, but even looking at him made me instinctively realize I wouldn’t be able to win in a physical fight. His stature made it look like his spin was made out of steel beams, and it was unbefitting of the atmosphere the shop gave off.

“I wonder. But enough of that.” Boudicia didn’t bother continuing the conversation and instead pointed at me, flicking her thumb.

“Aeon, this guy’s Yoshi. He’s the *Japanese* from my part-time job.”

“**Yoshi-san, hello. My name is Aeon**.”

“Huh?”

The sound first entered my head, with the meaning coming in with a second delay. He actually spoke Japanese just now. Because I haven’t spoken much of it lately, it took me a second to realize. In a hurry, I responded in Japanese.

“**My name is Yoshi. Nice to meet you, Aeon-san**…*Nice to meet you. You speak Japanese very well.*”

When I returned to English mid-way through my greeting, Aeon seemed satisfied and continued with regular English.

“I am quite interested in the idea of Zen. I even visited Kyoto and

Kamakura many times.”

“Despite his burly stature, he’s actually a bit of a spiritual fanatic.”

As the opposite of Boudicia laughing heartily, I could only nod to myself. He truly embodied the idea of Zen, so there was no arguing about that.

“And, I’m also a petty writer. Though it’s all plain graffiti and nothing to be boastful about.”

That also didn’t surprise me. Granted, his muscles were in a bit of contrast to the idea of an art supply store, but he did fit well standing in front of the wall of spray paint.

“Who’s petty?! This guy’s stroke control is on another level. If you let this guy write a tag at high pressure, there’s nobody in Bristol who can beat him. It’s seriously like Zen, or whatever!”

“Thanks, Boudicia. However, I simply was looking for an answer to my question. Right toward a wall, that is.”

Boudicia seemed oddly excited all of a sudden, but Aeon remained calm and collected always.

“How philosophical.”

“It’s simple. Art is a series of questions.”

“Not an answer?”

“An answer will immediately turn into another question. It’s the same.”

“What the hell?! Don’t just get excited without me!”

Boudicia must have been angry that she couldn’t participate in the conversation, as she slammed her hands down on the counter. Seeing that childish act, Aeon showed a warm smile.

“Boudicia, you should test your hand at mediation. It’ll help calm your feelings.”

“Shut it! When I achieve enlightenment, I’ll make sure to take you to Nirvana first on the list!”

“Haha, that is a very generous offer.”

“Boo-san, Nirvana isn’t hell. Rather, its concept is much closer to heaven.”

“Stop lying! Such a gloomy band could never be heaven!”

“Well, *never mind* that…”

As I was feeling dizzy from all the horrible misconceptions and proclamations that just reached my ears, I could hear Aeon muttering something.

“You two sure are close.”

“Huh? The hell are you talking about? In what world would we look like that to you? Your sunglasses shouldn’t influence your hearing, too.”

“Well, let’s just leave it at that,” Aeon said with a smile and clapped his hands. “Anyway, Boudicia. Which ones are you gonna buy? Get a big purchase and I’ll make it cheaper for you. I’ve waited this whole time, after all.”

He waited? What does he mean by that? But before I could say a thing, Boudicia threw in a sharp answer.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. Someone put graffiti on our store. Can’t say I’m too keen on getting involved, but letting this stand ain’t an option either!”

“Doing it while being fully aware that you’d be there definitely is rash. Though I think it’s just a bad coincidence.”

Listening to his words, I thought for a moment and then posed a question.

“Um…why is writing graffiti on a shop like that rash?”

"*Good question*, Yoshi."Aeon raised his index finger and pointed at me. "One side of graffiti is the rivalry. Most writers have their designated areas where they conduct their work, and they see it as their own turf. If another artist writes their graffiti on that turf, it can very well be seen as a declaration of war."

I had no idea such a culture existed. And that fact revealed another fact I had kept in my mind as a possibility.

"That means that Boo-san is also a writer, right?"

"Ack."

"Not to mention quite the famous one?"

That would explain a lot.

"Hey now, Boudicia. You haven't told him?"

"Oh, for the love of…I don't like talking about boring stuff."

I had expected something akin to that reaction, but Aeon's follow-up definitely threw me for a loop.

"Not just famous. This lady here is a top-class graffiti writer. Nobody here in the area doesn't know the ***Ghost of Bristol***. And everyone's saying that she's a genius."

During that explanation, Boudicia had an expression like she ran into a rotten apple while going through her fridge. And yet, Aeon spoke of it like a famous restaurant in a tourist area, his expression fulfilled and proud.

"I just said that graffiti's rivalry in a way, but there are absolute unwritten rules. In this case, we say that 'If you're going to ***Overwrite*** something, write something that is more difficult to accomplish, or something that excels the former work.'"

"*Overwrite*…"

"That's right. The walls here in town are limited, meaning that you have to write your own work over someone else's. But, it has to be

something more difficult and admirable than the one before. That's how the rivalry in the field of graffiti came into existence."

"Aeon, will you just…"

"And the Ghost of Bristol is a specialist at overwriting. Leave behind any poor graffiti and she'll appear from the shadows to—"

That's where Aeon's explanation stopped. The reason for that was Boudicia slamming her left hand on the counter. The small flower pot on there shook greatly and almost toppled over, but Aeon grasped it just in time without even so much as blinking once. The flower inside still dangled a bit left and right.

"That's not very nice, Boudicia. I strongly recommend you look into the art of mediation." Aeon placed the flower bot back on the counter as he scolded Boudicia.

Unlike me, who was genuinely flustered because of this action, he was as calm as always.

"It's your damn fault for not shutting up. And…my head is always empty, 'kay?" Boudicia must have gotten a hold of herself, as she awkwardly stuffed her hands into her pockets and looked away while mumbling. "…Someone wrote on our shop window. Using a Montana beryl green."

"Beryl green? Now that is…"

"Yeah, I'm sure of it. They're on the move…Aeon, did anybody buy some of your beryl green lately?"

I listened to them that far when everything finally connected. I wondered why Boodica came here if Aeon wasn't the culprit. But, that should have been obvious. She wanted to obtain information about the actual people who did this.

"I sadly cannot disclose personal information about my customers."

"Not playing on sharing anything, huh?"

"I have no clue who you might be looking for…But, I feel a bit

hungry right now. I'd love to go for some burritos at the Bearpit. And also…" Aeon crossed his arms and showed his white teeth. "If you're gonna erase the graffiti, you'll need a *solvent*, right?"

"Kah, goddamn chocolate bastard."

"*Affirmative*. I am quite *sweet*, see. Especially towards talented artists."

"Zip it!"

Despite this being evidently praise, Boudicia didn't seem happy in the slightest. Instead, she took out a coin and slammed it on the counter.

"Here. Now gimme the solvent."

"*Thank you. Have a nice day.*" He grabbed the coin and then went to get a bottle of solvent, placing it in front of Boudicia like a bartender handing over a drink to a customer.

She grabbed this with her left hand and then turned around.

"Let's go, Yoshi."

"Huh? Where to?"

"Did you even pay attention? To the Bearpit."

With the solvent in one hand, Boudicia stepped out of the store and kept walking. I lined up next to her and asked.

"…Just who is Aeon-san?"

"A writer, duh?"

"Not that. He didn't seem like just any writer."

"Hell do I know."

"I thought you knew since you're acquainted."

"Sure, but his graffiti is his alone. Not interested in any more than that."

That comment left me slightly bewildered. Are all artists…or rather, all graffiti writers like that? While walking alongside Boudicia, I glanced over toward the town. So far, I considered it random doodles, but once I consciously looked around, I saw various types of graffiti in countless shapes written in all sorts of places. However, the graffiti I saw on that foggy day possessed so much pressure, it overwhelmed the unfamiliar me. The ones I see around here feel more like whims and ways to pass the time, lacking the impact I felt then. Granted, there were lots of types of graffiti, but compared to that lion, I couldn't deny that these were lacking.

"…It doesn't really feel like art."

"You say something?"

"No, nothing."

"You made fun of me, right?"

"Not in the slightest. I was just voicing a doubt I had."

"You're such an uptight bastard…" Boudicia didn't even hide the fact she was fed up.

"Just call it a redeeming feature, please."

"Heh, whatever. You're not totally wrong, either." Boudicia stopped in her tracks and pushed her fist against a wall with graffiti written on it. "If you ask me, this is just third-class at best," she said and grinned. "Perfect timing. I'll show you what real graffiti looks like."

*

"That is a bear, right?"

"Ye. Name's Ursa."

I looked up at the giant bear called Ursa.

"Hello there."

"As if someone would stand still to greet a bear."

“I wanted to pay my respects, so to speak.”

“*Totally weird.*”

A few minutes going northeast from 8-Bit World, we reached the business district called Shopping Quarter, which offered galleries and the Cabot Circus inside a shopping mall that acted as the city center of Bristol. The plaza located in the center there seems to carry the name Bearpit. The sculpture of the namesake bear Ursa was acting as the symbol here. Call it a sculpture, it wasn’t actually made of wood or stone, but rather a combination of black and white plates. Its shape reminded you of polygons, creating a feeling rarely seen in today’s art. It stood on two legs, and when you moved closer, you’d have to look up at it. It was bigger than an actual bear, which created greater pressure than from a distance. Boudicia walked away from the bear and toward the plaza, as I asked.

“Why did we come here?”

“If the color’s beryl green, then it must have been done by the crew who use this place as their nest.”

“Crew…”

“A graffiti team, so to speak. For the people who can’t write graffiti if they don’t group up. And the beryl green’s the team color of their crew.”

I had no idea such a system existed. I always assumed that graffiti was something you’d write on your own.

“Just to let you know…Don’t do anything rash. Some guys here can be a bit blood-thirsty.”

“What?”

Boudicia turned towards me and dropped an absolute bombshell of terror.

“Well, just relax and everything will work out.”

“I don’t think that accounts for anything I would call proper advice.”

“Stop being a little scaredy cat. Let’s go.”

The Bearpit was a circular space one set of stairs lower than its surroundings. Going down these and through a tunnel, you’d get access to the larger area. Finally, the name Bearpit finally clicked in my mind. What surprised me the most were the walls at these stairs and the passage we walked through. Every single inch was full of graffiti to the point calling it buried would be an understatement.

“Wow…”

Put in simple words, it was disarrayed. Rectangular letters, people’s faces, weird characters, realistic animals…So many images, with even more colors, mixed together to overwhelm me at every step. It’s not that every single piece of graffiti possessed immeasurable beauty and quality, but the overall energy this sight created was overwhelming. I realized that this is what graffiti was all about.

“Wow…This is completely different from the art of an art museum.”

“Yeah. You don’t wanna put graffiti in the same category as the dead art at the museum and gallery. Graffiti’s alive.”

It was an excessive statement, but the power I felt here left me unable to disagree.

“…Why are you writing graffiti?”

“Hm?”

“I was wondering why the people who wrote the graffiti worked this hard, and what went through their minds.”

It was a genuine question in my mind. They can produce something so awe-inspiring, yet they can’t even sell it. In fact, it goes against the ideals and rules of society. And yet, I can feel such passion and desire from the graffiti here.

“Hmmm…To write even better graffiti, I guess?”

I remembered the unwritten rule of graffiti that Aeon taught me. If you’re going to *overwrite* graffiti, it has to be more complicated or

better done than the previous one. It's the rhythm that drives the writers forward and brings the harmony to keep pushing graffiti to greater heights.

"You need some serious determination to *overwrite*. You gotta win, or you're done for. Because if your version sucks, you'll get overwritten immediately. It's a genuine fight."

Despite the disturbing statement, Boudicia spoke with a gentle and warm tone, like she was caressing a pet she had kept for years.

"…And, when you finish one that has you going 'This one's so awesome!', it'll stay for a while without being overwritten."

It was perfectly logical. Overwriting something while abiding to the unspoken rule, your work will definitely stay a lot longer without being overwritten. And to a writer, that must be such a prestige.

"That's exactly it. It feels like…it's all alive."

I gasped and looked at Boudicia's profile. She had such a saddened and lonely expression on her face, I felt the need to say something.

"Um…"

"Hm? What?"

"Isn't there one…you've written, Boo-san?"

She didn't answer my question and just pointed at a corner of the tunnel. There, I spotted a small ghost with the words **BOO** written next to it. It was a round ghost that had fangs growing, but it looked more adorable than scary. It reminded me of a character from a game I played years and years ago. The character would approach you when you had your back turned towards it, but when you directly looked at it, it would hide its face with a flustered expression. Teasing it like this was so much fun, I did it all the time. And to be honest, it resembles Boudicia in a way.

"Just this one?"

The reason I asked something this insensitive without thinking is that

I had such a familiar sight in front of me that made me careless. When I realized I shouldn't have said that, it was already too late.

"Yeah. That one's just a small sign left. The rest was all overwritten," Boudicia said.

She spoke with a nonchalant tone, but her expression was enough. She was smiling, evidently holding back something. And yet, I didn't know what to say. Seeing me stuck without a response, Boudicia continued with a cheerful tone.

"Don't make that face now. I just lost…That's all there is to it. I'm not a genius or anything. And this wall is the proof for that, so no use being bothered by it." Boudicia moved away from the wall and did a long stretch, ending with a yawn.

From then on, she turned her back toward me without saying a word and started walking again. That sight of her reminded me of a stray cat. With its tail standing high and an empty stomach. But I didn't know what to say, so I quickly chased after her.

"More importantly…"

We passed through the tunnel and stopped in a corner of the plaza. Stopped there was a green bus. For a second, I was bewildered at the existence of a bus inside a plaza like this, but it all made sense. The letters **Bearito** were written on it with paint. It must be a pun on bear and burrito. I didn't know if I should laugh or cringe at it. And looking closer, I could see what looked like a menu written on a blackboard next to it. It seemed to be a small restaurant.

There stood several tables with chairs in front of the bus, allowing customers to eat while being seated. A relatively small but bulky man with very white skin was currently cleaning one of those. The baseball cap he wore had the profile of a queen inside a circle imprinted on it. I feel like I've seen that coin before, but as I hadn't been living here for too long, I couldn't clearly remember. And despite me feeling a bit anxious at the sight of that man, Boudicia walked toward him without hesitation.

"Hey."

“*Heya.*”

“Two burritos. Can you deliver them for us?”

“Huh? Sorry there, but we don’t offer that kinda service. Please just give us a moment to get them ready,” the chubby man said with a somewhat perturbed tone.

“One I’d like you to get to the art supply store at Park Street. The other…will go to a game shop called 8-Bit World.” Boudicia kept her gaze sharp as she continued her words like slicing away at some meat.

He could have feigned innocence. However, as the man’s expression distorted in terror, it spoke more than a thousand words. No mistaking it—He’s our guy.

“*Bullseye*, eh? So you did it!” Boudicia grabbed the collar of the man as he staggered backward, questioning him further.

“Eeek! I-It wasn’t me! Or rather, it wasn’t just me!”

“Hey, Peni! What’s going on out there.”

The shriek of the chubby man must have reached the inside of the bus, as another man poked out his head with a nonchalant voice that was deeply mismatched considering the situation. I could even tell from here that he was a good bit taller than his friend, wearing blackish-green eyeglasses. His orange-colored hair and beard were equally thick and hairy.

“This one’s dangerous! She’s a *beast*!”

“If I’m a *beast*, then you’re the *feast*. Out with the truth or I’ll chew you up, you piggy.”

“Eeeeek?! Save meee!”

The chubby man called Peni pleaded for help. He might be able to break free from Boudicia’s grasp if he really tried, but he probably lost all strength because of the pressure she put on him.

“Mhm, yeah. This one’s bad. Her eyes are bad. Everything is bad. Don’t get involved with her.” The man inside the bus nonchalantly said so as he caressed his beard.

“It’s already too late, though…”

“What’s with that long yet narrow bod of yours anyway? You some giraffe?” Boudicia glared at the man inside the bus.

As if to respond to that specific comment, the man bent his back to step out of the bus and walked toward us.

“You’ve got guts, lady. My name’s JF. I’m responsible for the coffee at this establishment, and my friend Peni there handles the burritos. We’re two-in-one. And if you lay our hands on my partner, you won’t get off scot-free.”

Boudicia let go of Peni and then turned to face JF, who looked down at her.

“…Right. I get it. That means you two did it. You know a place called 8-Bit World?”

“Ah, that store!”

“Cat’s outta the bag…”

Boudicia glared at the two of them.

“So you guys came to mess our shit up, eh?”

“But, um, so, well, do you have proof?”

“That’s right! We demand proof!”

“Not even willing to admit it? Well then, maybe I should start spreading rumors that the writers of this place are shitty writers who sell awful burritos all around Bristol.”

“Ugh…”

“Th-That’s dirty!”

“Let me ask you again. You guys did it, right?” Boudicia’s sharp glare pierced the two of them.

The two grew pale and looked at each other, finally surrendering.

“We’re very sorry!”

“We were the ones who did it!”

What is this, even? With just a small graffiti, she managed to trace down the culprits in such a short time. And as Boudicia was unaware of my shock and bewilderment, she continued to put more pressure on the other two.

“All right, I won’t hand you over to the police. Instead, I’ll have you erase the graffiti.”

“But we have our restaurant…”

“Everyone in the Bearpit will starve.”

“Say that again. If you’ve got time to complain, then I’ll stuff your mouths full of spray cans. Got it?”

“Scary! Too scary!”

“That won’t fit! That definitely won’t fit!”

“I’m asking if you got it!”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Yesh!”

After that, Boudicia had the two make two burritos, slammed the solvent on the table and handed them masks to get them to erase the graffiti. JF was even ordered to deliver the burrito directly to Aeon’s store. Oh yeah, he mentioned that he wanted to eat a burrito earlier…Maybe this is some sort of payment for giving us the information?

As for Peni, he was utterly terrified of Boudicia until the very end. I

even started to feel bad for him, but erasing the graffiti he created was a fitting punishment. Boudicia was Boudicia, still showing proper manners to pay for the two burritos. She sat on her usual chair, watching Peni erase the graffiti as he was crying his heart out, munching on the beef and cheese burrito.

I observed this scenery and was filled with profound emotions. Not even a few hours ago, I didn't even know what kind of drawing I was looking at. And yet, Boudicia figured it out in a matter of hours and even dragged the culprit here to erase the graffiti. Being guided by her, I encountered so many people and witnessed so many things, and yet—I still didn't know a thing. About graffiti…and Boudicia herself.

"Boo-san."

"Mhm?"

"Thank you very much."

"Huh? Why're you thanking me?"

"I was just happy about this new experience I got to make today."

"The heck? *Totally weird.*"

She flashed a wry smile as her translucent blue eyes, filled with light, gazed outside the store. And at the same time, I felt a strong desire to learn more about the kind of scenery she had captured in her eyes.

Column 1

What is graffiti?

One of Banksy’s representative works, located in the city center of Bristol: Mild Mild West.

A type of street art that revolves around writing and drawing various

things on walls or public places using spray paint or pens. The artists are usually referred to as “writers.” It began as simple drawings and doodles of one’s own artist name until it exploded and mixed in with modern hip-hop culture. With the birth of the ‘Overwrite’ rule, namely, to write something more outstanding than the previous art, a rivalry and contest aspect was added to the art of graffiti. With many cases revolving around property damage, strictness around the creation of graffiti arose, when it moved from regular street art to various other aspects in the 90s. Even so, a lot of artists are still active in the scene. Not only did it greatly influence the art world, but also fashion and design.

Famous artists are Banksy, Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and more.

1A reference to Akazukin Chacha.

Advertisement

Chapter 2: “For the Captain”

I am standing atop a stage. The light directed at me was so bright, I couldn’t see the audience very well. In my hands, I held a guitar. I realized that I was going through the same usual nightmare. I knew exactly what would happen now. And yet, I suffered like this was my first time going through it. I glanced at her profile as she stood next to me. She didn’t look at me. It’s the same as always. And then, the concert started. Matching the drums and bass, I played the guitar. It’s the same song I’ve played over and over. What comes next, what I have to do, I know all of it. Not just because I practiced this more times than I could count.

No, it’s because I’m the one who wrote this song. However, the singing voice of the person next to me was unlike anything I had ever heard. It should be the melody I came up with, and yet…I frantically moved my hand to try and match the song. However, no matter how hard I tried, it simply wouldn’t keep up. The rhythm was on point, the pitch was identical. And yet…something crucial that I could not specify…was mismatched.

I knew that myself. It wasn’t mismatched…It was that I couldn’t keep up. That I couldn’t be on the same level of beauty as this song. And as I struggled, the song ended. I don’t even remember what I did. As the audience cheered for our performance, my chest felt empty.

“Yoshi, that’s not good enough.”

On the way down the stage, that person called my name. Clear eyes entrapped me. As if they had seen through everything. And then, they delivered the final blow with as much of a beautiful voice as during our performance.

“Your music has no soul.”

*

“Yoshi-kun! Big trouble!”

Because of the nightmare I had, I completely overslept and only barely made it in time to 8-Bit World. Usually, our manager Radesh would usually sit in the office in the back, but he actually stood outside the store. He wore his usual red-checkered shirt with jeans, alongside a red hat with a white coverall that made him look like that famous plumber. I don’t think he’s purposefully dressing up like that, but especially his mustache looked so uncanny. The only differences were his Indian facial features, and that his nose was more like a triangle than a round dot.

He deeply adores Japanese games and wanted this store to gather a lot of people with similar interests. In fact, he set up a space inside where you could play older console games or card games, which is why children often show up. Usually, he was a very relaxed and gentle soul, but today, he had a complicated expression on his face. And I immediately grasped the reason why.

“This is…”

Another graffiti had appeared on the store window outside. However, the size couldn’t even be compared to what we previously dealt with. It covered most of the entire glass. The center of the graffiti consisted of an uneven pattern. I had no idea what was written there, but it must have been some letters. Next to this was a plush teddy bear leaning against the pattern. The dominant colors were green and pink, making the entire body look pop and adorable, and yet the bear’s expression was riddled with anger, as blood was dripping from its long claws.

“Someone must have written this yesterday. Really, how bothersome,” Radesh said as she narrowed his already dejected eyes further.

The way things looked, just erasing that whole thing would take a day or more. Maybe even several days. And as I was staring at this massive graffiti in awe, Boudicia arrived at the store.

“Ah, Boo-san! This is big trouble! We have another graffiti—”

Boudicia looked at the graffiti and froze up. Her eyes shot wide open, as she stood still like a statue of ice. Finally, she melted and tore her gaze away, mumbling under her breath.

“…Don’t know.”

“Um, Boo-san?”

“Shut up! I said I don’t know!”

She then ran away, but before I could reach out for her with my hand, Radesh placed his own on my shoulder and stopped me.

“It’s okay, Yoshi-kun.”

“But, Radesh-san…”

“She must have a lot on her mind,” Radesh gazed at Boudicia stumping off, speaking with a comforting tone. “More importantly, I fear we have to close up shop for today. Can’t let the children get scared off with this on the window.”

Radesh’s soft shirt always smelled like spice. And while watching him walk inside the store for a phone call, I couldn’t exactly muster up the energy to head home, simply staring at the large graffiti.

“Hey there, Yoshi-kun…Oh, now this isn’t a pleasant sight.”

I was completely lost on what to do, as George happened to pass by the store. Perfect timing, you could say.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“This…is problematic.”

I felt relief and happiness that someone appeared who I could share my feelings with, but George brutally denied all of that as he showed a complicated face.

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve received reports that writers have become much more active

in recent days."

Reports? Reports about what? And from where?

"Oh, did I never tell you? I'm an official here in Bristol. Well, I'm mostly tasked with miscellaneous problems, and graffiti countermeasures just happen to fall under that wing." George answered my question that I didn't even get to pose.

"Countermeasures?"

"I try to promote it more than anything. However, we can't have them write indiscriminately. For that reason, we try to provide walls and such for them to run wild, but…As much as it pains me to admit it, the City Council and graffiti writers are always in opposition," he said as he ran his hand through his wavy hair.

Seeing George with such a plagued expression was a new sight to me.

"And the problem is this particular graffiti here. Can you read what it says?"

"No, not in the slightest."

"This is what you call bubble letters. When letters grow thick to look like bubbles, see. It's a lot easier to read than the usual wild style, so you can figure out the letters with a good eye. The first one here is **R**. Then we have **E**, followed by **V**, **E**, **N**, **G**, **E**."

I did as George told me and focused my eyes. I struggled to make out the shapes at first, but there was a clear logic behind the writing, which allowed me to identify the letters of the alphabet.

"So this is…*Revenge*, then?"

"Exactly. Could I ask how the incident with the stencil graffiti ended up?"

"Ah, it came from some writers in the Bearpit…"

I began explaining the conclusion to that incident. And while doing so, I could see that George's face became gloomier by the second.

“No mistaking it. This is retaliation.”

“Retaliation…”

I still hadn’t fully grasped what George was trying to refer to, but just by pure instinct, I had a bad feeling about this.

“The culprit last time was a crew in the Bearpit, right?”

I remembered the tall JF and the chubby Peni.

“Yes.”

“That graffiti we’ve actually been seeing a lot lately, popping up everywhere. If I had to guess, the crew’s leader ordered their subordinates to go around using the stencils to put these everywhere. What Boo and you ended up catching were just the henchmen, so to speak.”

“But…for that reason?”

“That…even I don’t know.” George shrugged. “Most graffiti crews are akin to *outlaws*. The Bearpit is the holy ground for drug users and sellers. Even we from the city council can’t easily storm in there, so you best be careful, Yoshi-kun.”

Hearing that warning, a cold shiver ran down my back. Peni and JF weren’t as aggressive and tough-looking as I had expected writers to be, but this graffiti is different. Writing such a massive work on a large window for everyone to see, even matching the colors and everything showed clear hostility. And that would mean this is their revenge.

“…Boo-san!”

“What’s wrong?”

They know Boudicia’s face. And that she’s working here at 8-Bit World. If Boudicia is found by this crew, who is out to get revenge…

“George-san, do you happen to know where Boo-san ran off to?”

“No, not exactly…Ah, hey, Yoshi-kun!”

I didn’t even wait for George to finish his statement and already started running. Boudicia could be in danger.

*

“Hey, Peni. That guy over there.”

“No way I could forget. But that scary woman ain’t with him today.”

I came to the Bearpit, only to curse my own naivete. My head was full of Boudicia, but now that I think about it properly…Or rather, this is something I should grasp either way, but I am also a possible target of the other crew’s revenge.

“No, actually, I’m just…”

What’s the saying in English for moths flying into the light, or being a fish on a cutting board…It definitely doesn’t involve a green bus and a transfer student, which I am very sure of. Ironically enough, these idiotic thoughts raced through my head, completely ignoring the danger I was in. However, this terror didn’t continue for long.

“Yoshi, what are you doing here?!”

“Boo-san!”

Boudicia appeared out of nowhere, gasping for her air as her skin was colored a faint pink. And I quickly realized why.

“Don’t go running around all by yourself! At least work with me!”

She came here to help me. Honestly, I was relieved. Is this how a princess feels when she sees a knight in shining armor come to her rescue?

“Let’s get outta here before she finds us!”

She grabbed my hand and tried to drag me away from the Bearpit, but the other two surely wouldn’t let her do that.

“H-Hey, Peni…”

“I’m about to piss my pants, JF!”

I take that back, it was extremely easy. That last time seemed to have inflicted severe trauma. But, there was something else that caught my attention.

“Who are you referring to—”

The answer suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

“*Oh dear.*”

A sharp voice broke apart the silence, to which Boudicia and I turned around.

“Captain!”

“P-Please save us!”

We looked toward the direction of JF and Peni’s cheers. What I first saw was beryl green hair. It shone in vivid bluish-green color, tied into twintails at the top, shaking left and right. The area around her was colored in black makeup, and the light shining in her eyes emitted a clear strength. The small ring hanging down from her lips was connected to an ear piercing with a chain. Her slender legs appearing from her short and frilly skirt eventually connected into leather boots, decorated with tacks, standing on the ground in a dignified manner. Her shoulders, chest, and thighs shone brightly to the point they blinded me. And when Boudicia laid eyes on that person, her expression distorted into one of disgust. She seemingly had given up on running away, now facing this new arrival.

“What a wonderful day this is. The prey I had been searching for all this time came leaping into my arms.”

“Lara…I really didn’t want to run into you here.”

“So you know me, wonderful. That’s correct, I’m Lara. Captain Lara of the graffiti crew **Queen Bear’s Revenge**, ruling the turf here in the Bearpit,” she spoke with a high and clear voice.

And her words made my body tense up. Captain Lara—She's the one who sent Peni to put that graffiti on our store, as well as the one who followed with that larger graffiti we found a few moments ago.

"It seems like you looked after my dear JF and Peni, yes? Coming to see them erase that graffiti…You're the enemy, I see."

"Of course. It's the least I could do after they wrote that on our store. And you're next in the line to get a piece of my mind."

"What might you be referring to?"

"Don't play dumb now. I only need one look at you to tell that you were behind it this time."

I may not know much about graffiti, but I knew instinctively. Whether it was her color or the air she gave off, Lara was an exact representation of that graffiti. Or rather, the graffiti perfectly represented her, rather.

"Come with me and erase it."

"And if I declined?"

"Then I'll tear out that nasty piercing of yours."

"For real? Dissing the captain, how insane can you be."

"Lara-san, she's lookin' down on us!

JF and Peni had pepped up completely after Lara's arrival. They act like weaklings in front of people they can't beat, only to act arrogant and confident when being sure of their victory. The way their attitude switched depending on the situation was something I simply had to admire, even simply for its stupidity.

"What was that? I heard the Bristol Zoo's looking for a runaway pig and giraffe, so maybe I should be a good citizen and help bring them back?"

"Now, now, I can't appreciate that derogatory tone towards my own crew."

Lara stood strong to face Boudicia, as one step with her thick boots created a loud sound. They were close enough that they'd lock swords if this was a fight. And with them standing face-to-face like that, I only now realized that Lara was comparatively small. At least compared to Boudicia, she seemed fragile that a single touch could break her. The reason I didn't catch on to that so far is that the pressure she emitted spoke for itself.

"Hah, is our dear ship captain angry now? Can't do anything without your boyfriend? You're more like a princess."

"Well said for a stray kitty. It's because of your nasty outfit that nobody will bother to give you any attention. Could you stop flashing all this jealousy at me despite being some dirty dust cloth?"

They spit poison at each other and exchanged glares. Even now, their foreheads were about to clash. Sparks almost became visible between them. But in the end, the first one to move away was Lara.

"If you came here after looking at the graffiti, you must be a writer, too. How about we resolve this bout with our graffiti, then."

"Oh, zip it! Who's gonna write anything for your sake?!"

"N-Now wait a second. Lara-san, was it?"

My head finally began moving after I could take in this whole situation. Granted, I'd love to see such a graffiti battle unfold, but looking at Boudicia's attitude, I'm afraid that she'll see red any second now. In fact, I came here to save her, anyway…Although I ended up the princess in the process.

"Who are you? This stray kitten's boyfriend?"

"Wha…You moron, that's not it!"

"You were surprised to hear that Boo-san had your crew members erase the graffiti, right?"

"What about it?"

I tried to connect the dots in my mind. Something sounded off.

“So it’s not normal to have the writer erase the graffiti?”

If there are any drawings or doodles on a storefront, you’d definitely erase them. And getting angry at having your graffiti erased is something I can sort of sympathize with, but the way Lara phrased that, she saw it as a problem that Boudicia had Peni erase the graffiti himself. And she called Boudicia an enemy for that. There must be a particular reason for that.

“Of course not. It’s regarded as a message for other writers. To fight under Captain Lara.”

“All the writers who see the beryl green and find their way here to the Bearpit are all our allies. We went around town to put the stencils everywhere for that reason.”

I see…So it’s like a secret code that only a fellow graffiti writer would understand. That would explain a lot. If you wanted to connect and communicate with the scattered writers in Bristol, using graffiti as a means for that was the most convenient method. And the skeleton riding on the ship while carrying a spear would evidently convey the meaning of ‘Let’s fight together.’ Now I finally understand what she meant by her previous statement.

However, if you went out of your way to erase it, especially while knowing that it was a means to gather other writers across the town, then it would explain why Lara saw this as a sign of hostility. Though it still doesn’t fully explain why she wrote graffiti on the window just to execute her revenge. But more importantly…

“Boo-san, you knew about all of it from the second you saw the skeleton graffiti, right? That Lara-san was the one giving orders, and that the graffiti held a message.”

“Tsk.”

That click of her tongue acted plenty as affirmation.

“I thought it was weird. You said you knew who ordered it, and yet we only went to see the henchmen. Even now, you ran off without saying a thing…What is going on here, Boo-san?”

“…Boo?”

Listening to my monologue, Lara showed a bewildered expression. Her large eyes with the black underline opened wide, as she closely inspected Boudicia’s face.

“Did you just call her Boo? Could you possibly be…the Ghost of Bristol?”

“…Maybe? I may have had that name at some point.”

Yet, Boudicia didn’t return that gaze and looked away.

“H-Hey, she’s the Ghost?”

“The one who hasn’t been writing at all lately.”

“To think the Ghost would appear in front of others. And I had no idea it was a woman all along.”

“Getting a good look at her, she’s pretty cute, no?”

“This is pretty crazy. The Captain and the Ghost are standing face-to-face. I feel like I’m witnessing a historical event here…”

“This is crazy…The legendary encounter…”

“Huuuuuuh?” Boudicia looked at them both with a killer glare.

“Eek!”

“Waah?!”

“JF, Peni.”

“Yes!”

“Yes.”

“Could you give us some time alone?”

“Aye, aye, Captain!”

JF and Peni did as they were told, walking away while still periodically glancing back at us. Yet again, I was reminded how much gravity the name of the Ghost of Bristol carried. Just what graffiti had she written in her prime? And…I really don't know a thing about Boudicia.

"What kind of relationship do you two even have?"

"Oh, shut up. This is our first meeting."

"What are you saying? We've clashed so many times! Every day! All night!" Lara said as she leaped at Boudicia.

All that fighting…and now this? Honestly, with their difference in height, they looked like sisters.

"G-Get away from me! And stop with the weird innuendos!" Boudicia blushed furiously, trying to push away Lara.

"Geez, how cold! I finally got to meet you! I've been looking for you for so long!"

"Looking for her…?" I repeated her words.

What does she mean by that?

"Back then, everyone spoke of the rumors. Will it be the Ghost? Will it be the Captain? A for the position as the *King* of Bristol. We fought hard for it. But…One day, the Ghost just vanished. Without any warning, even. I've been searching ever since…believing that we could meet again. Because…we're destined to be rivals!" Lara put her hands together in front of their chest, her eyes sparkling.

Hearing that, everything clicked. Leaving aside the whole destiny argument, they were rivals at some point.

"That's why I didn't wanna meet you! I was so sure you'd be turning this into a bothersome mess! You've always been so persistent when it comes to graffiti, too! Shit!" Boudicia cursed as she gasped for air, finally breaking from Lara's grasp.

That one comment finally connected the dots in my head, explaining

why Boudicia had been acting so irrationally in this whole ordeal. She wanted to stay away from Lara, trying her hardest so that they wouldn't run into each other. As someone who had his own crew, Lara must be a celebrity in the world of graffiti. Even her hair color couldn't stand out more. It wouldn't be weird for Boudicia to know her. At the same time, Boudicia was probably trying to hide her identity. Because she didn't want to be found by Lara—is probably one part, but considering that most graffiti is regarded as a crime, people like Lara might be the exception to the existence of writers.

"Aww, I'm glad that we could meet like this! I never would have imagined that the Ghost would be such a charming girl!" Lara jumped for joy.

She seemed utterly delighted at finally meeting her rival in person.

"Wha…!"

"But, you're my rival, so do something about that lame hoodie of yours. Did you buy this from a charity shop? Or picked up from the garbage? Oh well, you don't have to worry. I'll lend you some of my clothes. I'll turn you into the cutest pie!"

However…those feelings of delight seemed to be moving in an odd direction.

"Leave me alone! Also, there's no way I could flash my shoulders or legs like that! It's damn fall season, aren't you cold?!"

"So what if I am? Clothes are something you wear with your soul," she said with a genuine expression, showing no jesting manner whatsoever.

She probably felt so from the bottom of her heart—A soul, huh? I was reminded of painful memories and shook my head.

"By the way, the Ghost being here is one thing, but even are you? You're not a writer, right? A DJ? Skater?"

That question pulled me back to reality. It seemed like the atmosphere had softened up quite a lot between these two compared to a few minutes ago, but her caution toward me had yet to subside.

And met with this cold attitude, I was frozen stiff.

“Um, well…”

“He’s Yoshi. A student.”

“Ah, yes. I’m a student at Bristol University.”

If you made a ranking for the worst and most misplaced introductions, I would surely take the top spot for what just happened.

“*Oh dear*. And what is such a well-behaved puppy like you doing here?”

“We work together at the same part-time job. At the store your guys put the doodles on.”

“That I am sorry for. But Ghost…if I had known if it was you, I would have invited you personally!”

“And I didn’t come here to specifically meet you! I just came to pick this guy up.”

“I’m sorry…”

“I swear…You had me sweating buckets when I got contacted by George. Going here all by yourself…”

I didn’t know that George was the one who instigated this helping hand. I planned to look for Boudicia, and yet I was the lost child who had to be picked up. Truly, how pathetic…

“Listen up. Just go erase that graffiti.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The one you wrote on our store window.”

“I didn’t write a thing.”

Boudicia and I looked at each other.

“Now hold on. You wrote that graffiti, right?”

“I did have people going around the town to have them put down graffiti with stencils. However, they were all small versions that could be erased in a heartbeat. I didn’t write anything that big on a shop window.”

“But then who wrote it?”

“I’m saying that I wouldn’t know that. What graffiti was it?”

I took out my smartphone and showed her a picture. Lara closely inspected this with her long eyelashes and was lost in thought.

“…That really is my graffiti.”

“Right? No way I’d get your work wrong!”

“I’ve written a lot of graffiti in my day. It looks similar to one I created a while back.”

“But this one is from last night.”

“That can’t be possible. I was with my crew last night…But, it’s pointless to argue about. I definitely am related to this. I don’t know how this happened, but I’m sorry for causing you trouble,” Lara said and apologized without striking up much of a fuss.

It seriously didn’t look like she was trying to feed us a lie.

“…Is there a chance that someone from your crew may have copied your work, Lara-san?”

“Not possible,” Lara immediately responded. “If anybody attempted to do that, I would let them regret the day they were born. My crew is my flesh and bones. However…writing something that will obstruct the business of a store, that I cannot cast aside. I will send someone over to have them erase it.”

Seeing Lara try to take responsibility, even Boudicia couldn’t keep her harsh attitude going.

“Well…I was sure it’d be you…But, our store owner’s troubled by this. So, yeah, that would be great.”

“Sorry about this, Lara-san. We jumped to conclusions.”

“Likewise, thanks for filling me in. I see it as inexcusable that someone would go around causing trouble while copying me. Once I find who did this, I’ll put them through the grinder.”

Hearing that she was the leader of a graffiti crew, I thought she was just an outlaw putting her work randomly all over town. And her initial appearance with an oppressive attitude initially supported that but talking with her like this, I realize she’s not a bad person. Granted, she can be excessive when it comes to certain aspects.

“But thanks to that, I finally got to meet the Ghost! That I am thankful for!”

“Stop clinging to me! And will you quit calling me the Ghost already? My name is Boo!”

“Boo! But then call me Lala, too! I don’t plan on having you call me Captain, either…But anyway, I’m glad. Standing on the same boat after having fought for so long…It’s like a dream come true. Our victory is right in front of us.”

“Hey, what the hell are you talking about?”

“What…? Don’t tell me you haven’t heard,” Lala gasped as she looked at Boudicia in shock.

She then crossed her arms, thinking for a moment. She then looked at me and back at Boudicia.

“…The city council is planning on crushing us—the graffiti of Bristol.”

*

Invited by Lara, we sat down at a table in front of the green bus. She snapped her fingers once as JF came storming to her, receiving orders. Following that, she cleared her throat and began speaking like

she was a politician about to reveal a grave and severe incident that had happened to the public.

“The Bristol City Council does not think too highly of graffiti. And, I can’t blame them. There are plenty of writers who put their nasty and low-effort tags on other people’s houses and walls. Even so, we’ve co-existed thus far. We don’t appreciate this town being filled with pointless doodles. We raised this graffiti culture over years, and it was we writers who turned Bristol into this town of art. And to ensure that no more talentless writers would go around terrorizing the good image of graffiti, we formed our crews. And the city council is aware of that.” There, Lara cut off her explanation.

JF had brought plastic cups filled with coffee, placing them in front of us. I thanked him and took a sip. Because we’ve been out in the chilly fall air for a while now, feeling the warm coffee enter my body was something I was thankful for.

“Ah, this is delicious,” I blurted out my honest thoughts.

It had a sour taste, probably a fruit mix of sorts. I’ve never tried this flavor before.

“It’s JF’s coffee. It’s my treat today, so stop by again if it tickles your fancy.”

I looked over at the green bus that Lara pointed toward, where JF raised a thumb with a satisfied grin. I signaled my gratitude and raised my arm back at him.

“However, with the dismantling of Ursa and the demolition of the performance stage, we’re at a bit of a loss. They just one-sidedly push these agendas. Not to mention that it’s not just those. They intend to remove all the graffiti here in the Bearpit.”

“Really?”

“Would that be something to lie about? The thick-skulled upper echelons in there all consider it bad for public safety. They’re putting the blame for their failing politics on us. Gathering area for the homeless, a breeding ground for drug flow…Honestly, we don’t wish

for this, either. The homeless need a place, and I would never allow my crew to get involved in drug trafficking."

"You said that it was all one-sidedly from the city council, right? Is there any chance of a conversation…?"

"Radio silence whenever we try to reason. We've also gathered signatures, but I don't see us reaching a table for negotiation anytime soon."

I had no way of judging what kind of place the Bearpit really is. My first encounter with Lala was, quite literally, a fearful encounter with a wild bear, and in terms of the graffiti argument, I can understand the city council's argument that this could hurt the public image and safety of citizens. However, listening to what Lara had to say, it truly wasn't all that simple.

"If they plan on forcing that sort of purge, then we'll fight back. That's why I gathered allies…While making sure that the city council gets wind of this."

That made sense. The enemy she was referring to must have been talking about the city council. Lara explained that far, and stood up as she placed her hands on the table, leaning forward.

"Boo, Yoshi. Please fight with us. I can't forgive the city council's actions. Let's protect the Bearpit…No, all of Bristol. With the Ghost back, everyone will be willing to fight even more. We have to fight for our graffiti and fight together…"

"…er."

"What did you just say?"

"*Never.* I won't write. Do this on your own." Boudicia had finished drinking her coffee and crushed the cup.

"How could you say that, Boo? If we don't fight now, Bristol's graffiti will be crushed. Why don't you get it?!" Lara's voice was close to a hurt plea.

And yet, Boudicia did not bother to give it any attention.

“I’m not gonna stop you. Just don’t drag me into this.”

“Drag you into this…?” Lara stood up and walked next to Boudicia as her boots stomped on the ground. “You have plenty of responsibility to help, Ghost!”

Boudicia didn’t raise her head.

“The Ghost of Bristol. The masked spirit…The specialist in overwriting…If you dare fill the walls with any half-baked work, it will come for you from the shadows. And now, this Ghost is gone. The flimsy lousy graffiti stopped being overwritten. That’s why we have these untalented writers thinking they’re the next big hit, as they continue to doodle all over town. That is why the city council has begun moving!”

“*I don’t care. None of my business!*”

“*Bristol needs care! Writing is your business!*” Lara shook her head as if to cool herself.

She then sighed and continued with a painful expression.

“…I take pride in being born in Bristol. That is why I want to protect the culture of this city. Boo, why won’t you understand that?” She said and then looked around the Bearpit with her big eyes.

I had wondered why Peni and JF held such respect for Lara. I didn’t understand how someone as small as her would be accepted as the leader of a graffiti crew, but it finally cleared up for me. And yet, Boudicia once again blocked off.

“Acting all arrogant while hammering down on me…The only people listening to your nonsense are your crew members! Stop ordering me around!”

Boudicia’s aggressive attitude forced me to tense up.

“You think you’re some savior? Gathering up henchmen and then calling it a day? Captain? Don’t make me laugh. You’re Snow White who hasn’t set one step outside the dwarves’ house. Yoshi and I aren’t your dwarves who run at your every command!”

“What was that? Come on, say that again. I won’t let you make fun of my crew!”

“I’ll say it again as long as it takes! I don’t plan on playing along with your make-believe revolution!”

It was like the eruption of a volcano. I knew she didn’t like working. And I knew she had a nasty tone. However, what is this unbound anger? I met Lara, learned more about Bristol and the Bearpit, and the misunderstanding of the graffiti was resolved…I tried to stop Boudicia and spoke up.

“Boo-san, please relax for a moment.”

“Shut up! It’s your fault for just waltzing in here that I had to run into this woman! And if you hadn’t said my name, she wouldn’t have found out, either! Aren’t you nice!”

“Hey, Boo. Are you just venting your anger on him? That’s pathetic.”

Let alone oil to the fire, I poured a whole canister of gasoline onto it. Realizing that she was reaching breaking point, I pulled in my neck. However, the next voice that reached my ears specifically called out Boudicia’s name. And that one I hadn’t expected, yet knew.

“I was looking for you, Boo! Yoshi-kun!”

“George-san?”

He seemed to have been running here, as he gasped for air, his clothes in disarray. And without any warning, he continued.

“Something bad happened!”

Advertisement

Chapter 3: “Over The Bridge”

“What happened George-san?”

“Graffiti…Someone wrote graffiti…!”

“Relax, Parsley. We see that on the daily here!”

George was gasping for her as he had his hands on his knees, but Boudicia showed no concern and asked in a sulking tone.

“The…Clifton Suspension Bridge!”

I’ve never seen George this flustered before. Looking at him like this, it must be something extraordinarily serious.

“What happened?”

“Yoshi-kun…Yeah, I will have to ask for your assistance in this,” George stood up straight and took a few deep breaths. “The Clifton Suspension Bridge is a suspension bridge built around 150 years ago, regarded as one of the world’s oldest. It’s one of the historical buildings that make up the historical symbols of Bristol.”

“Writing in such places…These third-rate writers have no respect for history and culture,” hearing Lara’s words, I remembered the rules of overwriting.

When looking at a building of such historical value, I doubt any graffiti would have more value than it.

“What’s the big rush? Just erase it again?” At the same time, Boudicia nonchalantly played with the string of her hoodie, seeming disinterested.

“The size is on an entirely different scale. After all…It’s the main towers!”

“What did you say?!”

“Hey now, the main towers…? But that’s…”

Lara swallowed her breath, and even Boudicia stopped her hand in shock.

“Yeah, thirty meters. And it’s one whole side. I told you, we’re dealing with a grave situation!”

A graffiti… the length of thirty meters was drawn on a building that had existed for 150 years…Even I understood the gravity of the situation by simply hearing those measurements.

“And the timing couldn’t be worse. With the city council’s stance towards graffiti growing negative by the second, if they use the vandalism against historical buildings as a reference to having all graffiti removed, even I won’t be able to keep them at bay.”

“There’s no guarantee that will happen! If the writers work together now, we can fight off the city council!”

“Yes…But that is most likely why…” George put one hand on his forehead as he looked at me. “Back in the 90s, we saw large-scale dance parties, so-called raves, being popular everywhere. It also ended up as the trading ground for drugs, which forced the police to intervene. That, in return, gave birth to a conflict between the force and citizens who truly loved the culture.”

“Conflict…”

“Sorry, I phrased it a bit too naively. It was a *riot*. The police and the citizens began to fight with each other.”

“A riot?! They all tried to protect themselves from the police!” Lara protested.

Looking at how peaceful Bristol is nowadays, such a situation is hard to imagine.

“I understand what you’re trying to say. I just need to tell you that the city council is highly cautious of such a possible incident

reoccurring. Graffiti possesses strength. It turned into a banner and voice during the riot. That is why the city council can't ignore it. If they proceed with the eradication, you're still getting off easy. There's a chance the police will have a right to the use of force. I'd personally like to have things end peacefully…"

"Wait, are you from…" Lara put one hand on her mouth, and even I held my breath.

George is an official here in Bristol. Meanwhile, Lara is a proficient writer with her own graffiti crew. In other words, they are mortal enemies. However, that worry was only fleeting.

"Captain Lara. I know you quite well. My name is George, and I'm an official with the city. However, I'm thankful to you for gathering up the writers that could cause trouble. I understand that there are a lot of things you want to say, but we're dealing with an emergency here. Could we postpone this for another time?"

"Hah! Heard that, Peni? A dog from the city council's lowering his head towards us!"

"As expected of the Captain!"

"JF, Peni, this isn't the time to be happy!"

Those two suddenly were all revitalized seeing George's attitude, but Lara immediately scolded them.

"Anyway, I'll make my way to the city hall and try to explain the situation. Boo, you go find the writer who did this. I'll handle the negotiations then."

"Huh? Why me?"

"It's bad if the police get them first. And if they're shown on the security camera, it's just a matter of time, too. Leaving aside your regular city wall, we're looking at vandalism of a historical building. That'll be ten years of penal labor or a fine of more than 5000 pounds. And at this time, the police will take this very seriously. And if they get confined once, they're out of my reach. I can interfere with the reports, but not forever."

I sneakily took a glance at Boudicia's profile. She was quiet, and I had no way of guessing what she was thinking. However…I realized that we couldn't keep going like this.

"Boo-san."

"What? I'm not doing this."

I brought my face closer to Boudicia, who didn't even look at me and whispered.

"…Hey."

"Huh? Wh-What?"

"Let's look for them. I know you can do it."

"Yoshi, you…"

"You don't want all the graffiti to disappear, right?"

"Well, duh…"

"I definitely don't want it."

Not while I still don't know a thing. About the girl in front of me… and graffiti as a whole. As well as the answer to the question I carry with me. There was a brief silence, yet long enough to assume the live performance of a song could have stopped. During that time, I looked directly into Boudicia's eyes. I wonder just what her blue and translucent eyes were looking at.

"…Got it. If you're that adamant on it, I'll go," she pouted, and I naturally didn't miss that.

"Boo-san!"

"O-Only this once, okay!"

"You done talking? Good. I'm counting on you, Graffiti Detective!" George said so with a peaceful tone and ran back the same way he came.

It must be an extremely dire situation, and yet he came to look for us regardless. Even if he mainly relied on Boudicia, I want to answer his expectations. And that wasn't a lie.

"…I'm going, too." Lara had remained quiet so far, now looking at us as determination filled her gaze. "Of course, I will. Friend or foe doesn't matter. I have to find the writer. If not, I don't deserve the title of Captain."

"Captain!"

"So cool!"

"JF, Peni! You look after the bus. Go around asking the crew and contact me if they find anything!"

"*Aye, ma'am*!"

They responded in perfect unison, running off in another direction. If the city council started causing chaos, they would suffer, too. And after seeing them off, I turned toward the two girls. Boudicia and Lara remained silent, facing each other. I hesitated if I should say anything. I knew that this was a problem between two writers. And, I'm not a writer. But suddenly, Lara offered her right hand. Boudicia looked at this offered hand, and then stretched out her own. Then, Lara took that hand.

"I shouldn't have gotten so fired up before. Sorry."

"No, well, um…" Boudicia failed to give a proper response, just mumbling.

"Anyway, let's move together for now. That…George just now, I'll take him up on the offer. We'll engage in a temporary truce." Lara removed her hand and pushed her shoulder against Boudicia's, grinning. "But I still haven't given up on you!"

Boudicia may not have broken her silence, but she did at least nod. After they stopped shaking hands, my eyes met with Boudicia. She didn't say a thing. She showed a complicated expression, one that wasn't related to her lack of motivation or the fact that the graffiti at the suspension bridge. I thought of saying something, but then

changed my train of thought and decided to follow suit with Lara. What I could do now was smile as best as I could, directing it at Boudicia.

*

The Clifton Suspension Bridge crossed the River Avon located to the west of Bristol. It was quite the distance away from our starting point, the 8-Bit World. And usually, this wouldn't be much of a problem, but Bristol consisted of a lot of consecutive hills. Yet, as I was slowly beginning to fight for air, Boudicia and Lara were perfectly fine. Then again, this much exercise might be something like a morning jog for graffiti writers like them.

"So this is…"

"Huge, right?"

Seeing me at a complete loss for words, Boudicia spoke like a proud mother. With the suspension bridge right in front of me, it definitely was a sight to behold. Two tall towers made of prick stood inside the large ravine, with white cables connecting the towers. Then again, the cables aren't comparable to the well-known string, and instead were like plates of stacked iron, fixed in place using bolts, and the radius of these had at least the same as a human's shoulders. The main towers looked worn down and victims of time, but the cables shone in a bright white, probably renewed several times. The various roads leading up to it were used by many vehicles and allowed regular traffic as always despite this having been built in the 19th century.

"Tsk, the police are snooping around."

"It is heavily guarded, yes."

The close vicinity of the suspension bridge was full of police officers wearing yellow fluorescent safety vests, talking with each other. They seemingly weren't blocking off traffic entirely, but they must be busy conducting an investigation right now. Seeing how big of a deal this had turned into, I could feel my body naturally tensing up.

“Ah, what’s that?” I stopped in my tracks and pointed at a building near the bridge, furnished with weird objects.

It looked like a decoration made of plastic, consisting of a small black circle with two red ellipses.

“Ah, those are poppy flowers. They’re set up in England when Remembrance Day is approaching. It’s to honor those who lost their lives in the war,” Lara’s comment had me looking around, as I saw several of these flowers scattered around the bridge.

I see, so the black part was the center of the flower, with the red ellipses as the artificial flower petals.

“But those aren’t real flowers, right?”

“It’d be too much of a bother, yeah. It’s not made for a ceremony either. Then again, some go the extra mile of buying the genuine thing,” Boudicia smiled.

I don’t think that honoring the dead is anything that could be qualified as ‘a bother,’ but this rational thinking was very much like what I knew from England. And with that cleared up, we headed to the wall that had the graffiti written on it. The graffiti George explained was on the two main towers. The tower closest to us was completely black, with a design resembling a flower drawn on it. Eerily enough, the whole thing was so immeasurable in size that I couldn’t even make out the full picture.

“*Oh dear*.”

“This is…”

Even Lara was taken aback, swallowing her breath. Boudicia had crossed her arms, lost in thought about something.

“I’m shocked. This isn’t any ordinary writer.”

“Yeah. Let alone *skill*, being able to finish such a monster without being seen is another feat that’s worthy of respect.”

Despite their experience in the field, if these two were this

bewildered, then I could guess how big of a deal this was.

“How did they even write this?”

Something of this size isn’t something you can create by just facing the wall. There must be some special method to this.

“When you’re working on some giant graffiti like this, you usually create something like a scaffolding you see when there’s construction work, or you rent a bucket truck…”

“And neither of them won’t work here because of how narrow the path is. Boo, you think they used a *ladder*?”

“But at this height? With that way it’d shake, there’s no way you could confidently write. One gust of wind and you’re down in hell. This would be *suicide*.”

I looked over the railing and straight down. The river was quite a distance away to the point I couldn’t even guess the exact number. Falling down from here definitely wouldn’t be anything to scoff at. Just thinking about it makes my back shiver.

“Let’s go to the opposite side, too,” Boudicia had her arms crossed as she quickly headed over to the opposite shore.

Lara and I chased after her. The police gave us cautious gazes, but we didn’t mind that and gazed up at the other tower. Here, too, it was obvious that it was drawn by a human hand, but with this up close, it was impossible to figure out exactly what they wrote. All this looking up was starting to make my neck feel stiff.

“Boo-san, can you tell what kind of spray paint was used here, just like before?” I asked, not expecting too much.

“This one is Flame’s orange.”

And yet, she immediately responded like she had waited for me to ask, leaving me bewildered. Not to mention that the content of her answer had me curious.

“*Flame*…? *Orange*…?”

Truth be told, the graffiti did look like it had a flame pattern to it, but that isn't the case here at all. It just looks like a wall of black.

"Flame's the *brand*. The oil-based acrylic stuff has a completely different touch to it, which makes it obvious. Usually, you have two types of spray paint when dealing with pressure. Flame's big for low-pressure blue and high-pressure orange. Low pressure is used for detailed writing, whereas high pressure is when you're looking at the time. And this wasn't a genuine nozzle, but a fat nozzle that immediately releases the pain. For the size, writing so much with a rough and peaky spray paint requires a lot of skill."

As I yet again admired her deduction skills, Lara looked at Boudicia with a dubious look.

"Boo, you can tell that much just by looking at it?"

"Huh? Any writer would be able to tell no biggie."

"…Sometimes you're so rude without realizing it."

"Huuuh? Why am I being dissed now?! I'll smash your head in with my Montana."

I almost burst out laughing while listening to their exchange. When it comes to writers, Boudicia's the only one I knew, and I figured that it was just the norm to be able to guess this much, but it appears I was under the wrong impression.

"But that's also all I can figure out. Can't guess much without seeing the whole thing."

"That's true. Then…"

"Yeah, over here."

"P-Please wait for me!"

As Boudicia and Lara turned around to walk the way back, I was almost left behind. When we headed back to where we started, they headed up a small hill road next to the bridge.

“We’re going hiking now?”

“Stop crying, geez.”

“Hee hee. Just a bit longer, so power through it, okay?”

Do graffiti writers have bottomless stamina or something? Or is this just the case for the citizens of Bristol? I once again chased after them, praying that my legs wouldn’t give in mid-way. After we reached the top of the hill road, we made it to the summit. What greeted me were benches, with a woman reading a book. But more than anything, the scenery was just breathtaking. From here, you could observe the suspension bridge and the river as a whole.

“I’m at my limit. Please let me rest a bit…” I sat down on the bench, with Boudicia joining me, and Lara right next to her.

“You’ve got no endurance, Yoshi. It’s because you’re not eating any meat.”

“But I’m perfectly fine despite being a vegetarian.”

“That’s why you’re stuck at the height of a dwarf.”

“How rude! Also, does all the meat you eat go right *here* by any chance, Boo?”

“S-Stop! Don’t touch me!”

I know I’m not one to talk after I sat down before the two ladies, but is this really the time to be fooling around? It feels like we’re genuinely forgetting about the problem at hand. However, the giant graffiti written on the bridge quickly stood out to remind us. From here, we could clearly see the whole picture that the two towers formed. And from this far away, the sheer size and weird shape of the graffiti stood out. It was art riddled with mystery. It looked like a large flame wrapping itself around the tower near bristol. And with the pillar stretching tall into the sky, it looked like a flame pillar that set fire to the tower. Additionally, it felt like you could see humans inside this flame like they were burning.

A cold shiver ran down my spine. What’s going on here? Meanwhile,

the tower on the opposite end showed a muscular man wearing what looked like a pelt. He held a bottle in hand, looking like he was going to throw it. He looked to be in anger, his expression distorted in fury. The spear-formed object nearby him looked like a shovel digging up dirt. I found myself entranced at this sight, and the two next to me who had been fooling around until a few moments ago were now staring at the graffiti.

“The pattern doesn’t look familiar to me.”

The first one to speak up was Lara. And of course, it’s not like she knows all the artists out there, but this one at least shouldn’t be that famous.

“Doesn’t seem like they regularly draw pieces or murals.”

“So it’s a slow-up or a tag specialist?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Um…come again?”

I couldn’t follow the conversation and asked like an utter fool.

“Tag refers to a quickly written graffiti that’s just one color. A slow-up focusses a bit more on the letters,” Lara explained as she laughed, and Boudicia followed up.

“And piece is short for a *masterpiece*. It’s the term for those who’ve got a lot of vigor and vision behind it. Murals refer to large graffiti.”

“But recently, you also call graffiti that was done with the permission of the owner of a store or building like that.”

Yeah, I’ve seen several graffiti that clearly seemed to have been done without permission yet looked awfully complicated and time expensive.

“Then again, this guy’s definitely not gotten permission. That much is certain,” Boudicia said as she pointed at the giant graffiti. “…I don’t like this one bit.”

Something had her grinding her teeth. And when our gazes met, she instantly looked away.

“Hm…What to do about this…”

We figured out the whole image. But, that’s about it. With no place to start, we’ve got cards in our hands. I opted to check out the graffiti once more.

“What could that bottle be that the man is holding?” I pointed with my finger and asked the two.

Half of this was to organize my own thoughts. The man had a shovel and bottle drawn with him. The shovel was stuck in the ground, that much I could tell. However, a bottle isn’t something you throw. If so, he should have a reason to do so.

“You’re right. Maybe he’s throwing it at what’s written on the opposite tower?”

“Bottle and flame…Burning men…Must be a molotov cocktail.”

Hearing Boudicia’s deduction, Lara clapped her hands together.

“That’s it! Then this must be **Mild Mild West**!”

Lara took out her phone and showed me a picture of graffiti.

“This is it.”

Mild Mild West. The phrase written with alphabetical letters up to the top of the graffiti must act as the title. And from the looks of it, it seems to have been written on a wall. To the left, you could see three men with rectangular shields. They wore special dome hats, meaning they probably belonged to the police force. Because they were surrounded by a white line contradicting the black background, it created a particular sensation that was neither detailed nor rough. Meanwhile, the individual opposing the police stood out the most. It seemed like a white bear of sorts, holding a bottle in his left hand. It’s the exact same one we could see on the tower, too. And below the ground they stood on, I could see thick alphabetical letters—BANKSY.

“This is…”

“Correct. One of Banksy’s graffitis.”

Does the work of one of the most famous graffiti writers and the graffiti written on the bridge have anything to do with each other? I compared the two in front of me.

“And this bottle is the… cocktail?”

“Yeah. The common name is a Molotov cocktail. It’s basically like a burning bottle.”

Looking closer, the bottle the bear held had fire coming out of it. But then, an adorable bear like that was awfully mismatched in the situation.

“Why would he hold something so dangerous…”

The one to answer my question was Lara.

“George mentioned that when the raves were getting suppressed by the police, the citizens and the force clashed, remember? The citizens of Bristol fought back with these Molotov cocktails.”

When I listened to George speak of that incident, I figured that a fight between police and citizens would be far too one-sided. However, if the citizens had this at their disposal, that would change a lot. And then, the war must have been much more severe than I could ever imagine. Like a true riot, even.

“This graffiti depicts the situation from back then. That’s why this became the symbol of Bristol’s underground culture, revolting against the oppression of the city. We’re not just living under the boot of the police. If we so desire, we can cause a revolution. We can change the world. Banksy and his graffiti taught us that.”

“After this, Banksy’s popularity exploded. Nowadays, the city’s working hard to preserve this graffiti. Laughable, ain’t it?”

Lara’s eyes lit up in excitement as she explained, whereas Boudicia was rational once again. It was the same when George explained it…I

guess she must have complicated feelings regarding Banksy.

“When I started writing graffiti, the Bearpit wasn’t such a dangerous place anymore. It was probably thanks to Banksy and the others winning against the oppression. After all, the city council is doing everything it can to preserve that wall as a piece of art. With more people accepting graffiti into their lives, the police or city council can’t just ignore it,” Lara said and gazed at the graffiti in the distance. “I don’t know what really happened, and I haven’t seen it with my own eyes. However, I want to fight. Fight to protect what Banksy and the others did all the way back. And…the person who wrote this graffiti probably feels the same way.”

I barely know a thing about graffiti. However, it’s easy to feel and grasp the fact that this town and its history, even the feelings of the people living here, were all packed into the graffiti filling this place. I never would have imagined that some drawing on the wall could hold so much value. And it’s far from over. Lara and the writer responsible for this carry the feelings of the previous generation. It’s a work written for the sake of the town, daring to take up after Banksy. The graffiti written on this bridge is carrying the weight of that. I looked at the graffiti again.

“I wonder why it’s not a bear, though.”

“What do you mean?” Lara asked as she looked at me.

“I mean…it’s clearly taken after Banksy’s graffiti, so why isn’t the man with the bottle a bear, too?”

“You mean there’s a reason why that part was changed on purpose?”

“Yes. Though I don’t know what exactly that could try to convey.”

“It looks like a *caveman*. Or maybe a *Greek god*?”

“That shovel belongs to the man, no? Would they really carry a shovel with them?”

“Shovel…I see, a shovel!”

I just muttered my doubt, but Lara suddenly looked at me as if she

had solved the riddle.

“Not bad, Yoshi. If this graffiti doesn’t show a caveman or god, then it has to be a *giant*! And that would reveal the next location they’ll write at.”

“Where would that be…?”

“Right over there!”

I looked in the direction Lara pointed at. There stood an old and worn-down construct, up at the summit of another hill.

“What’s that?”

Unlike the suspension bridge, it didn’t feel too grounded in reality. And its name sounded like it came out of a fairytale.

“The Giant’s Cave.”

*

The building standing on the summit definitely wasn’t anything breathtaking or awe-inspiring when it came to size. The rectangular construction with the cylinder-shaped tower adjacent to it reminded you of a small fort or castle, but it was much smaller in scale. Instead, it could only compare to a regular family house, which could be circulated around in a minute or less.

“What kind of building is this?”

“The Clifton Observatory. Don’t know much about it, but it’s hella old.”

“Oh, Boo. Always so blunt. It was originally a windmill that burned down, now offering a few smaller camera obscura rooms, and…”

“Nobody asked you to play tour guide!”

I see…So it’s an older viewing deck of sorts. That would explain the weird shape it had. Personally, I would have loved to hear more about what Lara had to say, but I can just ask her later.

“Hmm…All right, then let’s meet up some other time, Yoshi. Of course, just as the two of us～”

“Huh…?”

“Why would you have to do that?!”

“But it’s important to learn of the charm that Bristol brings, no? Or, what? Boo, do you actually…”

“Shut up! Shut up! Let’s just go!”

“Hee hee, how adorable!” Lara smiled with a teasing tone as she entered the building, Boudicia and I followed after.

The class door opened, with a t-shirt-wearing employee standing at the counter, greeting us. The modern inside of the building contradicted its outside appearance, making me feel like I had traveled in time. Meanwhile, Lara took out some money and handed it to the employee.

“What are you buying?” I asked.

“Tickets for the Giants Cave.”

“That…feels odd.”

“It’s 2,5 pounds for each person.”

“And it is quite cheap…”

“Not quite. It was free at first. So now, it feels expensive.”

Lara accepted the money from me and Boudicia, and we headed to the deeper part of the establishment. Hearing the term Giants Cave, I had expected a scenery akin to what could be a level in a fantasy game, but I was disappointed to see that it was a regular tourist spot. And without knowing of my dejected feelings, Boudicia and Lara headed down a small set of stairs, opening a door and passing through.

“Wow…”

The view that happened up beyond that door left me gasping. A hole opened up right in front of us. Iron stairs probably built some time ago connected to the hole in the rock. And with the lights illuminating the place, the cables hanging out in the open, it reminded me more of a coal mine than an actual cave.

“Does the oxygen even get down here?” I asked, as the air suddenly felt awfully tight.

“Don’t worry about that.”

“Yoshi, you scared?”

“Don’t blame me. This is normal when encountering a cave like this.”

“But I did say this was the Giants Cave, no?”

“It is too tight despite its name.”

“You’re a bit of a *scaredy cat*, hm? No problem, I’ll go ahead.”

“Hey, she’s making fun of you!”

“I…don’t particularly care, to be honest.”

Lara acted as the leader of the group, with Boudicia after her. I followed those two, who didn’t seem bewildered at this sight in the slightest, all the while being careful of my step. The rusted iron guard rail only existed to the right of us. Contradicting her previous momentum, Boudicia was now carefully making her way down the stairs. Lara seemed perfectly used to this, as she began to leave us in the dust.

“Are you okay, Boo-san?”

“I don’t need you worrying about…Waah?!”

I heard a shriek, followed by Boudicia’s body slipping backward. I quickly grabbed her, as her weight pressed on my arms.

“You two okay?” Lara’s clear voice passed through the cave.

I could faintly see her turning around with a worried expression.

“We’re fine!” I answered.

And then I sighed in relief that Boudicia didn’t hit her head.

“Um, Yoshi…”

“Yes?”

“Could you let me go?”

Only through those words did I realize that I ended up embracing Boudicia from behind.

“Huh? Ah, sorry.”

I quickly let go of her. However, the warmth she left on her arms remained.

“So, um…Thanks,” she said as she lightly pouted, pushing her eyebrows together.

It did not look like she was all too thankful, to be honest.

“You had me panic there. I thought it was all over.”

“Just because I slipped doesn’t mean that you’ll die!”

“Don’t even joke about that. I swear…Please be careful, okay?”

If she hit her head here, then we’ve got bigger problems than some graffiti. But seeing her face illuminated by the faint light above us, I sighed in relief.

“Wh-What?! Are you my *mum* or some…”

“Yes, yes. Anything is fine. I’ll go ahead, yeah?”

“…R-Right.”

Boudicia can be extremely clumsy. And even if she came here several times before, she easily slips on even the safest of ladders. I can’t

relax my guard for once. I made my way forward and tried to slip past Boudicia, when I felt like I was caught on something and turned around. There, I saw that her left hand was tightly holding onto my shirt. Her lips were shut just as tightly as her grasp.

“Everything okay back there?”

“Yeah!”

After checking that we were fine, Lara continued to walk ahead again. She seemed used to making her way down here but still went at a pace she was comfortable with. We did the same while ensuring that we didn’t bump our heads anywhere. And after moving down for a bit longer, we ran into steeper stairs that resembled a ladder.

“Jeepers, this one’s steep,” I mumbled, but Boudicia gave no response.

Instead of that, it felt like her grip on my shirt grew even stronger. I accepted this as her answer and quickly stopped, leaning against the guard rail, as I took one careful step after the other. Lara had gone so far ahead, I couldn’t even see her. After around thirty steps, a bright light awaited us at the tip of the stairs, forcing me to narrow my eyes.

“Is this an exit…?”

“Yeah. Though you can’t go anywhere,” Boudicia said as she let go of my shirt.

She walked on ahead so naturally, it almost felt like that previous incident didn’t even happen. I followed after her when I saw Lara’s silhouette in the backlight. Walking toward that light, we reached the exit of the cave. And just as Boudicia had said, this was also our final destination. It felt like we jumped out into the open air. The river was flowing past beneath us, and the opposite coast was covered with trees. The gush of wind passing through the ravine was cold, too. It took me a moment to realize that this was a stone opening forming deep inside the hill we walked inside.

And we currently stood at what could be described as a balcony of the cave. I was entranced by the outlook for a moment, but even

though we were practically standing on air, the ground was made of iron plates, which honestly didn't look too safe. If you fell down from here, you only had the river and rocks to cushion your fall, which would spell instant death.

And then, I glanced over at where the bridge should be. The first tower with the pillars of flame was hidden by the shore, but the tower depicting the giant with the Molotov cocktail was visible even from here.

"It seems like this cave and the graffiti must be connected."

"Bristol actually has a legend revolving around giants," Lara explained with a bit of joy in her voice, as I was still unsure what even the meaning of any of this was.

She always seemed so lively whenever she could speak of Bristol.

"A long, long time ago, two giants lived in Bristol—Goram and Gyhston. Both of them were in love with the beautiful Princess Avona," Lara explained with a sparkle in her eyes as she put her hands together.

She acted like she was putting on a stage play.

"During that time, Bristol had a large lake. And Avona said she would marry the one who could empty the whole lake. Isn't that…so romantic?"

"Is that what happened? I thought they just beat up each other."

"Boo! You're so wild…But, that's what's so cute about you!"

"Sh-Shut up!"

There were many things I wanted to say, but I opted to listen in silence. Can't break between those two.

"They didn't fight for her, they constructed the public works. Goram grew tired and fell asleep after drinking ale, whereas Ghyston steadily dug deeper inside the ground, emptying the lake. What he created through this process is the Avon Gorge, with the River Avon

passing through it. Both were named after Princess Avona. And in the end, Gyhston married Princess Avona. *The End.*"

"Some *Happily Ever After* like that sure is boring. That lazy princess should've just dug her own hole to empty the lake."

"You have a point. Her reasons for this aren't too well explained. But a princess is still a policymaker, so maybe it was for official reasons."

"But isn't it super inconvenient that a valley was made because of this?"

"That is true. It depends on the situation back at the time, but maybe it was a necessary safety measure to protect themselves from an outside invasion," I commented on Boudicia's question.

"You two clearly lack any romantic vision…" Lara held her head. "Anyway! The reason this place is called the Giants Cave is that it is said that Ghyston had lived here!"

"Doesn't look like a place a giant can fit, though."

"That is also true. The comment conception is that these were the remains of a church that stood here in the 4th century."

That would make a lot more sense. Coming all this way down here to then indulge in the scenery had an adorning feeling to it. It was perfect to offer prayers. But after listening to Lara's explanation, one thing clicked in my mind.

"So that giant holding the shovel…The graffiti must be representing Ghyston, right?"

"Yeah. And the people he's throwing the Molotov cocktail at would be Goram. Or in our modern sense, the city council and police, as all they do is drink ale and sleep around while the problems continue to grow…if I had to guess."

I was wondering why we couldn't see both towers from here, but that would explain a lot. Only Ghyston would be visible from here because this is where he worked. The more I learn, the more I realize how profound the meaning behind graffiti has become. Just who in

the world wrote it, though?

“Hey, look at this.”

It sounded as if Lara had found something because she beckoned us over. We approached her and looked at the wall. I could see several drawings and doodles, which you’d often see at tourist spots.

“It’s just random scribbling.”

“No, look at this one.”

One of them was new. And, the shape almost made it seem like a sign, written concisely with one color…The thick black we had seen with the giant on the tower.

“Hey, Boo. Can you read this?”

“No…I gotta pass.”

“Me neither.”

“Wait, really?”

I understood that the letters of graffiti could be hard to decipher but to think both Boudicia and Lara were helpless.

“It’s not art.”

“But, it looks important, right?”

“That is true…” I stood next to the two and gazed over the drawing.

Looking closer, I could see the usage of strokes, which then slowly turned into shape.

“…Ah.”

“What’s wrong, Yoshi?”

“I can read it.”

“Really?!”

“Yes. After all…these are *Chinese letters*.”

Two characters, to be exact.

“Then what does it say?!” Lara pushed her face closer.

Well, I could read the kanji, but it wasn’t an idiom I knew. However, they felt oddly…familiar to me.

“Put into English, this one here would be [Phase]. The other one is… a bit more complicated. It’s something along the lines of [Obligation] or [Appreciation].”

“What? That makes no sense. If you’re gonna be like this, you have to be upfront like the samurai!”

“Maybe it’s some sort of secret code?”

As those two were also lost in thought, I stared at the two characters. And then, I found the connection.

“Boo-san, Lara-san.” I looked at the two. “This…is a name.”

Boudicia’s facial color changed. The graffiti written in all black…a writing method in an unfathomable place…and a signature made of kanji. All this information connected in my mind, leading me to one conclusion. And the silhouette that popped up at the end of it all—was a familiar one.

*

Aeon showed no particular reaction when he saw us enter. After leaving the cave, the two girls and I headed directly here. There was no more need to guess or run around like a headless chicken. The conclusion…our destination…there was only one.

“Aeon. The graffiti on the bridge…that was your doing, wasn’t it!”

“Now…what might you be referring to?”

Because of his large sunglasses, it was impossible to properly filter out his expression. Even as Lara declared him as the culprit. His voice

sounded the same as always.

“To think I’d see the Ghost and the Captain standing side by side like this…It’s so bright, even with my sunglasses on.”

The fact that Aeon knew about Lara didn’t surprise me all too much. As an employee of a store selling spray paint, not to mention close to a gathering point of writers, it was expected that he knew.

“So you’re finally ready to step back onto the scene, Boudicia.”

“This is not the time to be joking around!” Boudicia roared, about to explode.

“Aeon-san, we went to the Giants Cave. We saw that graffiti.”

Aeon’s eyebrow twitched, and I didn’t miss that.

“You wrote it, thinking that nobody could read it, didn’t you? But, you forgot about me.”

“I see…To be more precise, I forgot about you. And I apologize for that.” Aeon quickly regained his calm expression and said so. “The first kanji read as [Ai[1]], with the second as [On[2]]. At first, I hadn’t connected the dots at all. Someone who isn’t Japanese…No, someone who wasn’t at least somewhat proficient in Japanese wouldn’t even put the two together to create [Aion]. And the only writer here in Bristol to fit that description…was you, Aeon-san.”

“Generation, history, life…That is what Aion means in Greek. And I had a priest at a temple in Kyoto connect it to this kanji. It’s supposed to remind us all that generations, history, and life all come together when we share each other’s feelings.” Aeon explained with a warm tone.

However, his voice quickly cooled down again.

“I may have written my tag there at the Giants Cave. However, I was simply overwhelmed by boredom at that time,” he crossed his arms and said so. “I know about the graffiti that appeared at Clifton Suspension Bridge. I also went to see it for myself. But as a writer living in Bristol, that is nothing weird. Who could blame me for

coming to look at it? But beyond that, I have no way or means of writing graffiti on there."

Originally, this shouldn't have anything to do with me. I'm not a graffiti writer, nor am I a resident here in Bristol. But even so, I couldn't step down from this. I wanted to know…Know why Aeon did something like this. And why people write graffiti. And once I find that out, surely…

"You have a way, actually," I took a deep breath, organizing the facts in my mind, and lined them up in front of Aeon.

"At first, I figured you'd created some scaffolding, but that's impossible. You were most likely hanging down from the top of the tower, using rope and harness."

"H-Hold on a second."

The one to speak up wasn't Aeon, but Lara.

"That's impossible. There are no stairs up to the towers, and not a ladder in the world could reach up there. How could he…"

I had yet to explain my train of thought to either of them.

"That's why…he climbed it."

"Climbed…what?"

"The thick plates on the cables."

"But one wrong move, and he would have ended up dead! No ordinary person could pull that off!"

Aeon hadn't said a single word so far. Instead, Lara was the one most bewildered.

"Of course. Logically thinking, there have to be people. If you can't drive a car there to deliver materials for a scaffold, or any other vehicle to allow for this type of work, then how else would people take care of the bridge's regular maintenance?"

“Ah…” Lara’s mouth opened, as her piercing jingled.

“No matter how sturdy it may be, it would be impossible for the bridge to continue the way it has since the 19th century without any means of maintenance or repair. In fact, the coating of the wires looked quite new to me when I saw it. Someone must have worked on that.”

“Yoshi, I like your idea, but I’m just a regular shop employee. I’ve never been an aerial worker.”

“Which is fine, as long as you hold similar qualifications and techniques. For example, a window cleaner, a carpenter, an electrician, a rescue worker, a firefighter, or possibly even…” I looked directly at the eyes hidden behind Aeon’s sunglasses. “Someone from the military.”

“What?”

“Huh?”

Both Boudicia and Lara turned around to look at me in disbelief, wondering how I could reach that conclusion. And yet, Aeon remained cool as before.

“Yoshi…Let me ask for your proof.”

“It caught my attention when we first met. Your stance and demeanor as one thing…You spoke with military jargon, saying **Affirmative** or **Negative** when answering questions.”

“That’s all?”

“This flower, too.”

I pointed at the red flower on the counter. It was the same flower Boudicia almost knocked over when we first went to see Aeon.

“Boo-san told me that this was to honor the victims of the war. I’ve seen them over town here and there, but since you own a real one, I figured you must have some sort of attachment to it.”

After a brief silence, Aeon's thick lips opened, showing his white teeth.

"…*Affirmative.* I'm a former **SAS, Special Air Service**, operative."

I had expected something along those lines, but hearing that name pop up now definitely took me even by surprise. And yet, Boudicia and Lara were just staring at Aeon in confusion.

"What's that?" Lara asked

"It's the world's first special service, operating under the English army. I see…That's why…"

"Hey, Yoshi! Don't just nod to yourself! What's going on here?!"

I don't blame them for not knowing. I just happened to learn about it from a game I once played.

"The air service would head behind enemy lines, parachute down onto the ground, and infiltrate from there."

"That's suicide!"

"They're an elite specifically trained for dangerous missions like such."

"And what does that have to do with anything?!"

"Parachute drops usually start a few hundred meters in the air. They have special anti-terrorism training to practice entering buildings through the windows. Meanwhile, the towers are just 30 meters tall. He should be able to easily make his way up there," I said and looked up at the sturdy man in front of me.

At first, I considered the creation of graffiti like that to be impossible, but once I understood the logistics behind it, it seemed all too easy for someone of his caliber. Of course, that was just a hallucination, because I still wasn't as talented as Boudicia or Lara. But after he listened to my explanation, Aeon began laughing. It was laughter from the bottom of his stomach, filling the shop. The three of us were unsure how to interpret this, however.

“I really can’t beat you. Yoshi, you are *brilliant*.”

“And why is that?” Restless, I asked.

How he wrote that graffiti wasn’t honestly that big of a concern to me. What I really wanted to know…was why. Why would he write such graffiti right there? Even for Aeon, it must have been dangerous and risky. Yet, why did he go to such lengths?

“Well…It seems like I must tell you after all.” Aeon slowly opened his mouth. “It’s a common story. To protect other people, I enlisted in the army, heading to the battlefield. In this situation where death could be mere seconds away, while fighting terrorists that looked like average citizens, I became lost. Wondering what I was even doing.” His mouth twisted as if he blamed himself. “The doctor said I suffered PTSD. That’s why I quit the army and returned to my hometown, Bristol…Except I wasn’t in the state to even work properly. I lived on the road for a while. Near the Bearpit, no less.”

He delivered a concise explanation…Almost too brief. And yet, the simplicity is what made it hit so hard. And I remembered Lara saying that the homeless need a place to stay, too.

“…Each time I heard a loud bang or crash nearby, I was pulled back into the battlefield. I escaped and left my comrades behind, and yet it always caught up with me again…What irony.”

“The…flashbacks.”

I heard about it before. It’s a mental illness that involuntarily repays past events in your head. And in this case, from the battlefield…and war. And despite knowing it, I couldn’t fathom what it was like to experience it first-hand.

“Back at the time, I lost sight of the path I should take. And as I walked past a garbage disposal area, I picked up a single book—About zen. Before I realized it, I was utterly engrossed. And in there, it told me…To practice and find my own heart.”

“That’s how you ended up writing graffiti?”

“Yeah. Though it’s probably different from the practices mentioned in

the book." Aeon scoffed. "Even so, by writing something on the wall, I managed to properly face what was inside my heart. Japan's sculptors create the *Buddharupa*, only to eventually reach enlightenment. It was the same for me. Eventually, the memories of the war and battlefields I had seen vanished without a trace. Quickly after, I found a job, which brings me to right now."

He said that it was a common story…And, that might be the case. Tormented by memories of war and fighting, living on the streets, only to encounter something that sheds light onto the darkness you live in. It sounds like a typical soldier's story.

"Then why did you write that graffiti?"

That question still stuck with me. I needed to know that answer.

"Let me ask you a question first, Yoshi. Why are you living?"

That question took me by surprise. Why…am I alive? I couldn't give an instant answer. Or more accurately, I didn't understand the question. What did he just ask me?

"Time is like a river, never-stopping. You can't even get a single second back. And one day, we will die. The time granted to us is nothing but a moment. Then…why am I even here?" Aeon dropped his gaze, speaking faintly like he was reciting something.

And yet, I was still struggling to even scratch the surface of that. Even so, Aeon continued.

"Needless to say, I don't have an answer, either. To me, enlightenment is something far beyond the horizon. However, humans are still forced to choose. There exists a crossroad in this town. And now…the time has come for me to choose."

The confusion inside of me slowly melted away. Like a block of ice standing on a sandy beach, his words slowly dissolved as they entered me.

"Aeon-san, what did you choose?"

It was a stupid question. Looking at the graffiti was enough for me to

guess. But even so, I wanted to hear it from him.

“When I lived on the street, the police were cold to me. Kicked me, ridiculed me, littering the sparse food I had on the ground in front of me. I fought to protect my hometown, and yet the city council didn’t even bother to look at me…But the writers in the Bearpit were different. They supported me, gave me a blanket, and taught me to write graffiti…” Aeon said as he looked at the flower on the counter. “I’ve heard of their plans for the Bearpit. And I have an *obligation* to fulfill. To repay them…That’s all there is to it,” he said with a deep but clear voice.

Listening to that, Lara slowly opened her mouth.

“I won’t say that I understand what you’ve gone through. However, we share the same feelings. We both want to protect the Bearpit. So let’s fight together.”

“Sorry, Lara, but this is my own fight.”

“But, Aeon…”

“Don’t misunderstand. I don’t deny what you’ve done. However, I’m not a member of your crew…and that is for the better.”

The one in his voice signalized that there was no room to argue, and Lara wasn’t so dense to miss that.

“…Okay, I get it. But, it’s reassuring to see how you decided to stand up for the sake of Bristol.”

“Thank you. Our goal is the same, so our paths will cross again eventually.”

Watching this exchange between Aeon and Lara greatly changed the initial impression I had of him. He seemed like a peaceful and heart-warming individual at first. And that is still the same. However, inside his bulky and well-built body was a burning passion and soul that was impossible to be contained. Looking at him, I had to ask myself…What was I doing here? I have yet to find what I was looking for. And as if he had seen through me, Aeon spoke up.

“Yoshi, life’s like an unstoppable spray can. All you can choose is how you move your hand until you run out of pain,” he said and asked me again. “So, tell me. For what reason do you live? Why are you here? As time marches on mercilessly, why do you stand right there?”

“…Shut up.”

The one to answer that question was Boudicia.

“Stop going around lecturing people, you Buddhism fanatic. Talking down on us like you obtained enlightenment…You don’t get a damn thing!” She grumbled with a gloomy voice.

“Boo, what’s gotten into you? Aeon was speaking to Yoshi, not you…” Lara was bewildered to see Boudicia’s change in attitude after she had remained silent all this time.

And yet, Boudicia continued without minding the girl.

“You’re selfish. At least come to talk to me once. It was you who pushed the spray can onto me. Yet you just decide to go solo, showing off like this. What the hell does *appreciation* mean? Don’t go talking like you own the *patent* for it. Even I…even I…!” She grabbed the collar of her hoodie with her left hand as her fingers shook.

I had no idea…that Aeon was the one who taught Boudicia how to write graffiti. And that explains why she went silent when she saw the graffiti on the bridge. She must have known from the start that it was her own teacher’s work. I tried to talk to her, but something else happened.

“Excuse me. This is the Avon Somerset Police.” A deep voice shattered the tension. “We have a few questions regarding the Clifton Suspension Bridge graffiti incident. Would you mind coming with us to the station?”

A police officer entered the store without any warning. He wore a black uniform with a dome-shaped hat and a mustache hanging below his nose. And right after him came two police officers wearing yellow safety vests. Seeing that, I remembered what George told me.

That it would be bad if the police found the culprit first. And that it was only a matter of time if he was shown on the security footage.

“Of course. I’ll help in any way I can…If there is anything I can say.” Aeon raised his large arms and stepped out from beyond the counter.

His attitude was so nonchalant and willing to cooperate with the police, something didn’t sit right with me. But now, it clicked. There’s no way a former military affiliate like Aeon wouldn’t know of the security cameras. It also felt weird why he wouldn’t work together with Lara…But what if Aeon had intended to be caught from the very beginning?

“Aeon-san, why?!”

“It’s simple. I wanted to convey my message to this city. I wanted to give them the courage to fight…That even if it seems impossible, we’ve come a long way.”

“But all for this…”

“Youuu bastaaards!!”

When I heard a roaring scream, it was already too late. Like a bullet leaving the gun, I had no way of reaching Boudicia as she shot past me. Her body moved as she rammed right into the two yellow-vested police officers.

“Gah! What’s her deal?!”

“I won’t let you have Aeon!”

“Boo-san!”

“He’s a goddamn chocolate bastard who’s always going on my serves…But he wrote that for Bristol’s sake! You police hounds have

no right to take him with you! Not you…who just go around hurting those weaker than you!"

"Boudicia, stop it. I'm okay."

"Like hell you are! Aeon, you're not wrong at all…You don't deserve this!" Boudicia's voice began to turn into screams.

"That's enough. If you obstruct our work any more than this, we will have to resign using force."

Even if Boudicia attacked the police officers, they couldn't immediately retaliate. However, he now gave her an official warning. There won't be a next time. And if she was still raring for more, then she'd have to face the consequences.

"You brain-rotten dogs should just chase your own tails like the idiots you are! Then go eat shit and sleep as you always do! As if you bastards understand what Aeon tried to do?!"

That clearly took it too far. Tension filled the air, as I looked around. Aeon was being restrained, and Lara showed no signs of moving…I have to do something. Think…How can I resolve this? However, I didn't make it in time. One of the police officers pushed Boudicia, who slammed into the wall behind her.

"Boo-san!"

"Now you did it, shitface!"

Boudicia stood up to leap at the police officer, but right before that—

"Stop!"

Aeon moved.

He instantaneously put strength in the opposite direction to create faint movement, twisting the arm of the first police officer holding onto him and shaking him off. He then stomped onto the ground to move behind the second police officer, currently still facing Boudicia, and grabbed his arm, twisting it up his back.

“Gah!”

“Hey!”

The police officer with the mustache panicked and attempted to give out orders, as the first officer recovered and took out a police baton from his holster, attempting to hit Aeon from behind. However, Aeon slammed the second police officer he had restrained onto the ground, grabbed the arm with which the first police officer held the baton, and flung the man straight into the counter. The second officer managed to stand up and tried to attack Aeon from behind, but a swift twist from him ended with his elbow stabbing right inside the officer’s solar plexus.

“S-Stop right now!”

Seeing the two police officers collapse on the ground, the officer with the mustache took out the tear spray, but before he could do another thing—

“*Sergeant*, please wait!”

Someone else appeared at the scene, gasping for air as his hair was drenched with sweat.

“George-kun…Why are you here?”

“Why…? Didn’t I tell you to contact me before you step in?!” He pushed up his trademark blond hair and bit back at the police officer.

And after looking around once, George heavily questioned the same officer.

“Explain what is going on right this instant!”

“He has gone rampant, and we were trying to keep him under control.”

“He fought back?”

“That girl over there provoked a police officer and tried to attack him. She wanted to assist the man’s escape.”

Boudicia heard that and attempted to attack again, but this time I was ready and stepped in front of her, whispering into her ear to put up with it for now. George glanced over at Boudicia but pretended to not know her, as he continued talking with the man he referred to as sergeant.

“We will be dealing with massive repercussions if a police officer gave in to provocation and attacked an average citizen first. And you, as the responsible officer present on the scene, will have to carry responsibility. This store contains security cameras and we could easily confirm the footage right now, but neither you nor I want to exhaust that time. Isn’t that right, Sergeant?”

“Y-Yeah…”

The man with the mustache was visibly bewildered. The police officers who got beaten up by Aeon slowly stood up, too. They glared at Boudicia and Aeon, but showed no intention of causing any more trouble.

“Also, why did you move without my confirmation?”

“We judged that a delay in action could bring risk to a police officer.”

“Then you should have considered that beforehand and consulted with me!”

“*But*…”

“*No buts*. I understand that the opposition faction of the city council is on edge, but Uncle has tasked me to handle the case of graffiti. You will be the one who’s in trouble for moving without confirming with me.”

“But the CCTV footage says…”

“I do not disagree with the necessity of the footage to be used as proof for a hearing. However, if there were to be anything opaque during the investigation, we will have a major problem on our hands.”

“That is true…”

“Then let’s go. You’re fine with that, yes?”

“Yeah. No problem.” Aeon responded to George and followed after the police officers.

As I watched him walk off into the distance, George approached me and whispered.

“Were you okay, Yoshi-kun?”

“Huh? Ah, yes, I wasn’t…”

“We’ll talk about this eventually. But, I have to go now.”

“Yes.”

“Look after Boo,” he said and left the store.

Both Lara and I were bewildered. Even Boudicia stood still like she was frozen in place.

“Boo-san, um…” I gently called out to her, but no response came. “Boo-san?”

I wanted to place my hand on her shoulder, but—

“Shut up!” She pushed my hand away and ran out of the store.

I looked at Lara, who still struggled to organize everything that had just happened. However, she then glanced at me once and nodded. I took a deep breath and dashed out of the store, trying to catch up with Boudicia.

*

With Bristol’s aptitude being relatively high, the sun usually sets pretty fast. I could still see the sun setting in the distance, but the sky above us had turned to night. And of course, I knew exactly where she’d be heading. We have not known each other for a long time, but I could easily envision where she’d run off to. And following that vision, I moved my legs.

“Boo-san.”

Shortly after, I spotted the person I was looking for. She was in front of the 8-Bit World. She had the front of her hoodie open, wearing the hood over her head, as she sat in front of the shop window, one arm on her knee, as the other was stretched out. The orange light of the street lamps made her white skin stand out even more than usual.

She caught on to my presence and glanced at me once, only to immediately avert his gaze again. Seeing that, I sighed in relief, but another half of me was still nervous. I’m glad that I found her safe and sound, but now that I chased after her, I had to be prepared for the implications.

I understand why she picked a fight with the police officer. Ridiculing and insulting Aeon, who ignored danger and consequences to write a message for the whole city…I get why she’d blow a fuse. However, her attitude toward Lara or Aeon definitely wasn’t normal.

Because I rushed here, my heart was still pumping. I took three seconds to get my breathing under control and then sat down next to her. She didn’t say a thing, but when I moved closer, I could pick up a sweet scent drifting through the air.

“Aren’t you cold?”

“…Nope.”

I was just relieved to even get an answer like this. After that, she put her hand that she dangled on her knee closer to her mouth, as a blue light flickered up from between her fingers. Following that, I heard a faint *psssh* sound, and white smoke blew out of her mouth. It was an electronic cigarette. And I was a bit bewildered to see her smoke like this.

“Color me surprised.”

“Mm. They’re without nicotine, though.” She repeated that same cycle as she responded with a listless tone.

“I didn’t know that existed.”

I don't have any disdain towards cigarettes, but I knew that these electronic cigarettes or vapes vaporized the liquid inside with a heated wire. You rarely see these in Japan, but they pop up here and there in the UK. I remember seeing some LED lights flicker up during a walk at night, so I was curious and looked it up. Boudicia glanced at me once and then spoke up.

"Makes me choke."

"Choke?"

"Nicotine ones. And they taste awful."

Hearing that, I burst out laughing. It was a reason you'd expect from her.

"Don't laugh."

I expected her to tell me to shut up or something along those lines, but she was a lot more docile right now.

"Mm."

She let out a faint groan and offered me the mouth part of the vape.

"What?"

"Try."

I was bewildered for a moment but had no reason to decline. I put my mouth to it, feeling how warm it was. I took a breath, to which Boudicia pressed the button, as another blue light lit up. Now, that sweet scent from just now filled my mouth. The scent was so strong, but it had no actual taste. It really worked in weird ways. As I breathed out, the same white smoke filled the air in front of me. And by trying this myself, I realized.

"Vanilla?"

"Ding ding."

Vanilla of all things…didn't really match her cool voice and wild

personality. Or…maybe it's the opposite. Maybe she's not as cool and wild as she initially looks. Boudicia pulled back her vape and took another hit. I realized that she'd practically shared an indirect kiss through this, but looked away to hide my embarrassment.

"I was really surprised when George-san came to the store."

"His uncle's a big guy at the police force."

"That makes sense."

That would explain the conversation he had with that police officer. He probably used that connection and slowed down the opposition faction that was against the graffiti. It was very much like him. He was still fighting to protect graffiti. And then, Boudicia and I went quiet. And after this continued for a while, Boudicia mumbled something under her breath.

"…You're not angry?"

"Huh?"

"Telling me I went too far, and whatever." She looked at her smoke disappear into the night.

"Why would I be angry at you?" I answered. "What you do, how you feel, it's your freedom. And what happens because of your actions…is your cross to bear."

"Heh, well said." Boudicia laughed faintly as more smoke escaped her mouth.

"But…"

"But?"

"I want to know what exactly you felt then."

Boudicia looked at me, seeming bewildered for a moment, only for her to smile faintly. And yet, instead of giving me an answer, she took another hit from the vape and blew off the white smoke.

"…When I saw that graffiti on the bridge…I honestly realized that I'd lost. The second I saw it, no less. I wouldn't be able to pull off such a thing. Not because I wouldn't be able to climb up there. Just…the look alone told me it was impossible. And that Aeon's a beast."

Blue light lit up from her hand as white smoke followed. I watched the smoke dissolve, waiting for her to continue.

"I knew immediately that he did it. But…I didn't wanna admit it… No, that's not it. I didn't hate the fact that I lost against him. I just don't wanna be annoyed at myself for that…But if I stopped the childish nonsense and just went to meet him directly, he wouldn't have been caught by the police."

"That's not true."

I understand where she's coming from. But, Aeon was prepared. Even as the police came, he didn't try to resist. It was never a thing of making it in time or not.

"You two managed to talk, right? If you had been there right away, he probably would have feigned ignorance. I think you did the right thing."

"Talk…huh? Did I really manage to have a proper conversation with him?" She breathed in the air and then sighed, as more white smoke disappeared into the night sky. "When you're writing graffiti, sometimes the spray paint just blasts off everywhere," she said as she raised her right hand, dangling it in the air. "When you're getting emotional…When you're engrossed in your work with lots of momentum, that's what happens. And when you realize you messed up, it's already too late. The things most important to you never work out…at least when it comes to graffiti," she laughed in a self-deprecating manner. "Or maybe I just suck at it."

I realized that…this was the first time she ever spoke of herself in such a way. She really struggled to get her feelings across, but I somehow managed to grasp what she was saying. She may be talking about graffiti, but…what she really wants to talk about isn't graffiti at all. I'm not a first-class graffiti writer, nor am I a philosopher who has reached enlightenment. I haven't known her for years, either. I'm

just a visitor who came from the outside. I can't even sweet-talk that fact. But at the very least…

"Boo-san."

"Hm?"

"Let's have a *battle*."

"But you can't write."

"Not with graffiti. We'll play a game."

Honestly, I was worried she'd just call me a brat and call it a day, but…

"Sure, I'm down," she agreed a lot quicker than I thought.

"But just playing a game normally wouldn't be any fun. How about the loser has to listen to one of the winner's requests?"

"I'm game." Boudicia grinned. "But no pulling out."

"Of course."

"All right, now you said it."

We opened the door to the shop and entered inside. 8-Bit World had several consoles set up for free use between the customers. It's not exactly good for businesses to be able to try the newest games, but it showed the manager's personal investment. I doubt he'd get angry if we played a bit. In fact, he'd probably be happy.

"Here you go, some crisps. Eat up."

As I was looking for a game we could play, Boudicia pulled a plastic bag out of her pocket and threw it on the table. If I had to guess, it must be some kind of snack.

"What did you say?"

"Hm? Crisps."

An unfamiliar word was thrown at me, and when I asked for clarification, it was flung at me a second time. I figured it'd be quicker to just look at the package.

"Ah, potato chips."

"That's what you call them? Taken after America, huh?" Boudicia opened the bag and grabbed a handful of crisps. "If you're from the UK, Walkers is where it's at," she dropped the name of the crisps maker as I could hear crunching from her mouth.

"Ah, I wanna play this one," she said and pointed at a racing game with characters sitting in small carts.

"Sounds good."

I put the disk into the console, grabbed the controller, and turned on the screen. Together with a familiar sound, I saw the nostalgic title screen. When it came to choosing characters, I went with the green dinosaur. At the same time, Boudicia immediately chose the evil turtle character with horns on his head.

"This guy's the strongest."

"So you've played this before?"

Seeing her easily control the menus and pick her character, I judged she must be experienced.

"Yeah. I'm not too into games, but this one I played sometimes."

I figured she had no interest in games. And yet, she played a game like this before.

"I've been wondering for a while…but if you're not into games, why are you working here?"

"Mm, because games are hella cool."

Her unexpected answer left me bewildered. Games are cool?

"What about them?"

“What kinda dumb question is that!” Boudicia laughed. “Games from Japan are just fresh. You often see characters from old games packed into graffiti.”

“I didn’t know that.”

It was an unexpected connection.

“Also…I owe a lot to Radesh.”

“To the manager?”

“Yeah. He was a writer before.”

“Seriously?”

I did not expect that in the slightest. He does not look like the sort of person who’d indulge in such outlaw activities.

“But that was a long time ago. He got tired of it.”

Tired…I remembered his lowered eyebrows. Writing on walls while staying hidden from security footage or other people’s eyes. There’s the turf war, the battle, and overwriting, and this even connects to the riot…I can understand his opinion and see how someone as warm as Radesh would get tired of it.

“Got to know him through Aeon, who sent me here. And…said I should play games when I feel down. That’s how I ended up coming here and started working when Radesh was short on staff.”

Hearing her speak down as she usually would almost made me burst out laughing. I’m pretty sure that Radesh offered her a job for her own sake. And yet, I could tell from her tone that she had big respect for Radesh.

“Enough about that, let’s play!”

While discussing that, Boudicia had finished choosing a course. The camera moved behind our carts, and the race began—

“Wah! The hell?! You’re so fast!”

Satisfied at Boudicia raging after losing the first round, I took a crisp…and ate it! In fact, I've always loved games. They're so easy to understand, telling me what I had to do. At first, I only played the newest releases, but eventually went for retro games, too. And I've played through all the classics.

"I really like games, see."

"A bit too much, if you ask me!"

"That's probably how I ended up with glasses. And you're not half bad, but you accelerate even in the rough parts. You have to wait for the right moment to drift around the corner to get a boost. And, your character's top speed is one of the best, so forget about acceleration."

"Tsk, I'll get past you, and if it's the last thing I do! I'm not going home without a victory!"

"Good luck with that."

We decided to race a different course. And while feeling nostalgic at the sight of all of them, I raced the out in out line. It's been a hot minute since I played this, but getting back into the groove felt great. In this game, you could get items by driving over symbols on the ground. Once I got the strongest item, the star, Boudicia stole it from me.

"Ah, you got me."

"Your fault for not paying attention!" She grinned confidently as she used the star she stole from me, kicking away the NPC racer next to her, and sped up.

In order to steal an item, she had to use another of her own, which had the shape of a ghost. For a second, I felt like I had seen that character somewhere else recently. And after a moment, I remembered.

"That's your sign, Boo-san."

"Mmm?"

“The ghost you used looks like your signature.”

“Yeah, this is where I got it from.”

I see. She did just say that a lot of graffiti originated from game characters, and she is an example of that fact.

“You can take the items from other people…Pretty strong, don’tcha think?”

“It sure is…With persistence.”

Yet again, it was a reason very much like her. She never wavers, and I really admire that.

“I don’t like losing, so my name’s the name. BOO, see.”

“It has a different name in Japan, though. The same one as the prime minister of the UK[3].”

“The heck? That’s so *weird*,” Boudicia laughed, and we focused back on the game.

Eventually, she spoke up.

“Also, I didn’t expect you’d be into games. You seemed more like the *serious* type.”

Serious…huh? Well, she’s not wrong.

“The game has its goals clearly marked. That’s why I can take it seriously.”

And because games are simple and straightforward.

“Hm, you could say that.” Boudicia commented, her facing seeming like she was enjoying herself.

Since I rarely get to see such an expression from her, I was entranced for a moment. And because of that, I drove right into the boulder that appeared in front of me.

“Ah.”

“Heh, that’s what you get.”

As my green dinosaur was saved with a fishing rod, the spiky turtle passed me by. That’s what I like to see…I stepped on the gas and drifted around the corner. I think I played the best round of my life after that, but it was still not enough to catch up.

“Krk…”

“All right, I won! Only got to blame yourself for running into that bolder like an amateur!”

“I won’t lose next time.”

“Heh, the next race is on my favorite map. I’ll win again, just you wait.”

The races went in order of the coup we had chosen, and there were five races total. I won the first two, but after Boudicia regained her gaming sense, she got the jump on me in the third and fourth races. We were so engrossed in the game that we even forgot to eat our crisps. Finally, the racers all stood at the starting line for the final fifth race, as we both stepped on the gas at the same time.

I took the sharp first turn and glanced at Boudicia, who glared at the screen, reflected in her eyes. An odd sensation filled my chest. Japan and the UK, Tokyo and Bristol…We were born in two separate places, growing up in cities that couldn’t be more different. And yet, we were playing a game right now. We might just be quite similar…Or rather, maybe not.

“…In Japan, I was part of a band.”

“What?”

Boudicia glanced at me once but quickly turned back toward the screen.

“First time I heard of that.”

“Because I didn’t mention it so far. By the way, I was the guitarist in a rock band.”

“Tell me about that sooner! Also, I can’t see that at all! You playing the guitar? So *bizarre*!” She said while laughing.

I personally don’t see myself as the artistic type either, but hearing that from Boudicia…did hurt a bit.

“I’m…taking a break right now. I do have my guitar with me, though.”

Boudicia didn’t respond. Since she’s usually sharp on the uptake, she probably filtered out how I feel. In the game, the spiked turtle was first, with my green dinosaur following.

“But, we sold pretty well. We were about to get a contract with a massive record label.”

“The heck?” Boudicia’s shocked voice resounded once more, as her kart slipped off-course slightly.

With the character she’s playing, he needs a bit to pick up speed again, so I used that chance to slip past her.

“Ah, crap!”

By the time she got back, my position had already changed from 2nd to 1st.

“That’s amazing. Why did you never tell me?”

“Well…Right before we sealed the contract, I got in a fight with our vocalist. Bit of a weirdo, they are…Kinda like you, Boo-san.”

“Huh? No way we’re similar,” she said, despite never having met each other.

“And they told me…That my music has no soul.”

Remembering this, I felt my chest tightening up.

“They’re a genius, you know. But…I’m not. I knew that myself, which is why I practiced a lot, studied a lot, and then played the guitar to match them. That’s why…I didn’t know what they meant by that,” I

coughed, my kart drifting off course, but I quickly corrected it. “Since then, whenever I think about music, I…can’t breathe properly. Can’t touch my instruments.”

I focused on the race in front of me. A curve, drifting, returning the steering, a straight, avoiding the roadblocks, grabbing an item, using it for a dash, taking the curve, drifting to the limit, getting a boost…I took a deep breath…breathing out. I repeated this cycle until I finally managed to relax my mind. Just remembering my past is what leads to this same result. It’s so pathetic. Truly pathetic. I just don’t have the courage to face my problems.

“And that’s why I ran away. From Japan…or rather, from my band.”

Putting the name of wanting to study overseas on it as an excuse. I only happened to get accepted at Bristol University. Of course, it was pretty tough at first, but I always listened to English music, and compared to my guitar practice, studying the language was a lot easier. Either way, my answer was plain as day.

And now, Boudicia didn’t say a thing. The spiky turtle stayed glued to my green dinosaur. I always admire them. Attracting people, standing out from the crowd. And I knew from the very start…that I was lacking something. But…Even if I know I need something, if I don’t know what exactly that is…it’s meaningless. I ran away to Bristol, but didn’t go anywhere.

“And that’s…when I bet you, Boo-san.”

Riddled with mystery, she caught my attention. And then I got to know her. I didn’t know what or why that was, but it felt like I could find the answer I needed through her. At the same time, a sound rang out, signaling that the final round had begun. The tapping on the controllers filled the room we sat in.

“Yoshi, a question.”

“Yes?”

“Do you like music?”

It was a complicated question, but I had my answer ready.

“Honestly…Not really.”

It wasn’t that fun. In fact, all I did was suffer through it. I don’t even know why I continued it myself. Aeon’s words, asking me for what reason I drew, stabbed into me like knives.

“…I see,” Boudicia gave a brief and vague response.

The race moved into the final curve, so we were on the final stretch. I imagined the map in my head, taking the perfect drift around the curve. And then—If she hadn’t said her following words, I would have won.

“I can see the similarities.”

“Huh?”

“Between you and me.”

I completely messed up my timing to drift. Thanks to that, my kart was blasted off the court. I tried to get back on track and stepped on the gas, but—it was already too late. Smoke filled my view, and then—the spiked turtle passed by me. It happened in slow motion, probably because I was so focused on the race.

“I won! Hah! I won, I won!” Boudicia screamed in joy like a little child. “How’s that, Yoshi? Don’t feel good, eh?” She grabbed the bag of chips to chomp down the last few crisps.

But seeing her face, another emotion other than regret at my loss filled me. She rolled up the bag and threw it away, not saying a word. And then, she slowly spoke up.

“…I actually don’t like writing graffiti.”

I stayed silent, waiting for her to continue.

“I just did it to win, but I wasn’t having any fun along that. Write, win, get overwritten, lose, write again, and win. The same cycle, constantly on repeat.”

It sounded like her voice was quivering faintly, and I don’t think that

was my imagination.

“And while I did all that…some stuff happened. I haven’t been writing at all lately. That’s why…you could say that we’re similar in a way.”

I tried to say something. But, no words left my throat, as I simply listened. I didn’t think I had anything to add to those words. And more than that…Boudicia just listened to me, so I wanted to do the same.

We cleaned up everything and then stepped out of the store. While locking the door, the cold fall wind passed us, making me shiver.

“Yoshi, you said that the winner can give the loser any one demand, right!” Boudicia’s voice had returned to her usual cheerful tone, as she grinned at me.

“Yes…I will keep my promise…”

Just what ridiculous demand is she going to throw at me? I'm scared. I was so sure I'd win, I hadn't prepared myself for this outcome. Curse my arrogance.

"Mmm…Then again, there's really nothing I want you to do."

"What about cleaning the shop?"

"You do that anyway."

"Ah, true."

That…isn't something she should just accept, though?

"Oh yeah, what would you have asked me to do if you had won, Yoshi?"

I hesitated before I answered.

"…Promise you won't get angry?"

"Oof, what? Don't tell me, the thing you wanted me to do was…"

"I don't know what you're thinking of but that's definitely not!"

"Then what? I won't get angry now."

It was like a lion inviting me inside its cage, promising not to eat me. Normally, I would be terrified to say anything, but…the lion looked like it was full, currently sleeping. And just as she said, that probably wouldn't last for much longer.

"Okay."

"Mm."

"…I want to know why you stopped writing."

Boudicia froze up. Her gaze wandered all over the place, only for her to sigh faintly.

"Okay."

“Huh?”

“I’ll tell you, Yoshi.”

Now I was the one bewildered by this unexpected response.

“Assuming you’ll beat me next time.”

I had to laugh at that. Rather than being disappointed, even this response was very much like Boudicia.

“Okay. What will we be fighting in next?”

“Anything’s fine…Just, let’s hang out again like this.” Following her words, a dull pain ran through my right shoulder.

“Ouch!”

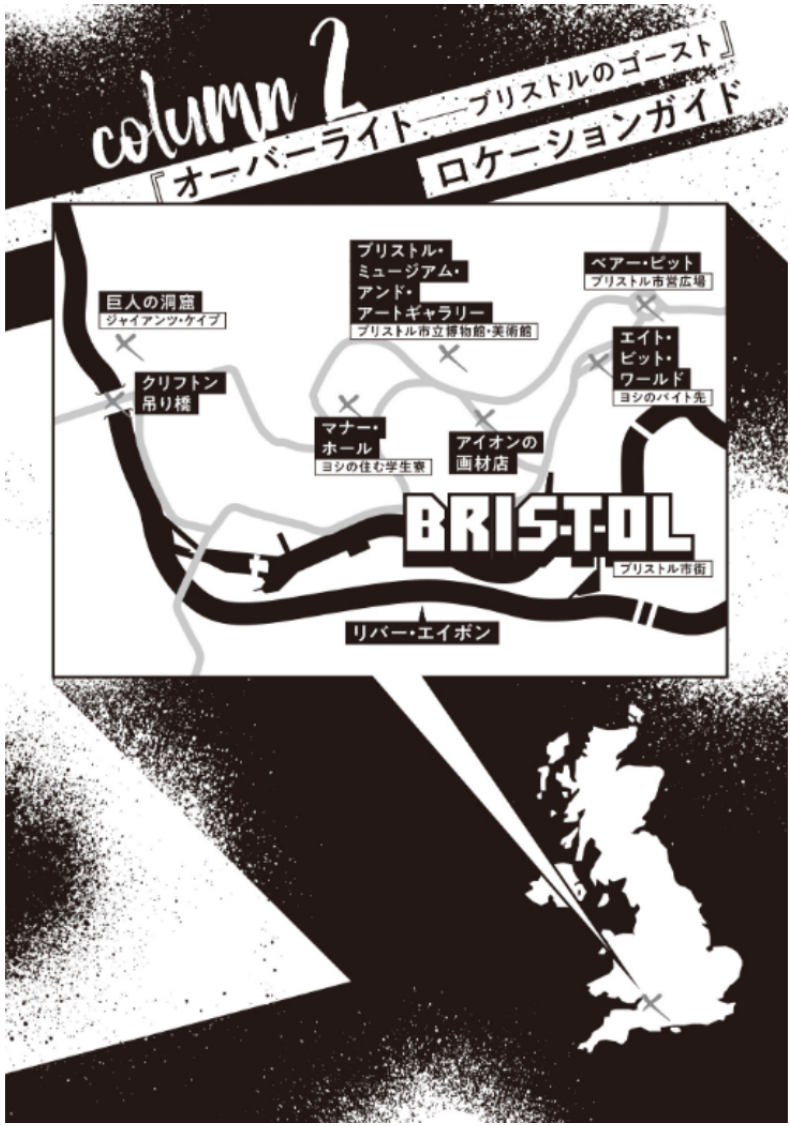
I immediately understood that this was because Boudicia had punched me.

“Wh-What was that for?”

But by the time I complained, she had already turned her back toward me. I couldn’t see her face anymore, but the words she told me while raising her left hand reached my ears clearly.

“*Cheers*.”

I was dumbstruck. Did she thank me? I swear, she never holds back with her insults, and yet when it truly matters, it’s like she’s a closed book. What would she thank me for? I had no idea. However, while seeing her run off, I felt something hot inside my throat. And I think that…this should suffice as my answer for now.



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1 相

2 恩

3 The Marioverse character Boo's name in Japanese is "Teresa," and the prime minister in question is Theresa May.

Advertisement

Chapter 4: “From the Stage”

“Hey there, Yoshi-kun.”

“Ah, George-san. Boo-san’s actually…”

A few days later, when George came to visit the store, I was the only one on a shift. The graffiti on the Clifton Suspension Bridge quickly made the news, turning into a major incident that shook Bristol as a whole. Whatever the media’s opinion, it was clearly seen as a provocation toward the city council and the preamble to a provocation. And as the graffiti was regarded as vandalism, the graffiti inside the city only grew in number. All writers followed Aeon’s example and revolved in their own way. Right now, the town and its scenery altogether have greatly changed.

I haven’t talked with Boudicia since that night, either. We happened to meet here and there during a shift, but I didn’t even know what to say, either. When I think of her, my chest tightens up, and I don’t know how to deal with these feelings.

“Actually, there’s something I need to discuss with you today.”

And since my head was full of Boudicia, that one line from George first sounded like some sort of misunderstanding.

“With me?”

“Yes. I wanted to tell you one of my secrets.”

Despite fooling around a lot of the time, his gaze now pierced right through me. I checked the time to see how long it was until the end of my shift and told him. He just sat down at a table inside the store and began reading a book. Once it was time, I grabbed my coat and walked over to George, who pointed at the door with a smile.

“Let’s chat while we walk, yes?”

I didn’t know where exactly he would be taking me, but I just followed him as he walked down Rupert Street.

“Now then, where do I even start…During this incident, I learned of his real name, but to preserve the respect I have for him, let’s keep going with “Aeon.” I want to begin with him.”

“What happened to Aeon-san after that?!”

“He’s being kept by the police, but he’s doing fine.”

“Thank god…”

There’s the police department relatively close to our ship, and when I think of Aeon being locked up in there, I honestly don’t know how to feel.

“That being said, I’m honestly impressed you managed to find the writer of that graffiti without relying on the security cam footage. Just what would have happened if not for you…I’m grateful that you were there to help, really.”

Just as he said, I’m glad we reached Aeon before things could have escalated further. But, the crucial part of it all was how things would proceed from now on.

“Um, what will happen to Aeon-san from now on?”

“We found out that the graffiti was written with paint of different coating so that it could be removed quite easily.”

“Oh geez…” I doubted my ears.

“He’s an employee at an art supply store, after all. He knows his way around that stuff. Although he didn’t tell us a single word about that. But knowing that he used paint that would not hurt the main towers, the judgment was adjusted. He will still have to pay a punishment fee, but he won’t be *prosecuted* at the very least. From an objective point of view, he had no intention of harming a historical building here in Bristol. Of course, the graffiti will be erased immediately, but

the message he tried to convey came across. What a writer he is, truly."

"Then the Bearpit should be fine, too, right?"

The moment I said those words, George's facial expression grew cloudy. I could instinctively tell that something was wrong.

"It's the opposite, Yoshi-kun. All I could do was soften the investigation on Aeon."

"What do you mean?"

"Aeon never intended to leave the graffiti behind. His goal was to convey a message. And that was perfectly fine. A wonderful art turned into a courageous and righteous message. But as a result of that, more people have become vocal regarding the city council's plans for the Bearpit. And you must have realized, right? There's graffiti popping up everywhere."

Rupert Street connected to Anchor Road, and we walked past the municipal hall. The ominous presence I felt soon turned into shape. In other words, the graffiti writers have received courage from Aeon's actions. However…

"The city council decided to put stronger measures in place against the graffiti, choosing to purge the Bearpit."

"No way!" I screamed.

Could something like that really happen? Of course, the growing density of graffiti in the city couldn't be categorized as a good thing. But even so, Lara, Aeon…and everyone else's passion, which I have seen up close, would all be erased. And I couldn't accept that.

"And it frustrates me that I'm powerless," George said so and bit his lip.

He must feel the same way as me. Is there really nothing I can do?

"I have no more cards in my hand that I could play—Except one, that is."

We passed by the Bristol Cathedral, right past the windows of the science museum, as George suddenly entered a sidepath away from the main street. Right after, I was assaulted with a sense of deja-vu. I've seen this path before. Like I had come here before during a dream…Or, could I possibly have…? After we walked for a bit, we suddenly reached a dead end, with several garbage bins standing around.

"I wanted you to see this," George spoke like a guide in an art museum, about to introduce another highlight, as he pointed at the brick wall.

"This is…"

I was at a loss for words. The wall was covered by a painting—of a lion. There were other smaller pieces of graffiti on the reddish brick wall. But the lion was resting in the center of that. His mouth was dripping with blood, telling the viewer it had just finished another hunt. The fur was drawn in such detail, you wouldn't think it was done with spray paint. He truly looked like the king of animals, the overwhelming ruler of the kingdom. That's the kind of feeling it gave off. It must have been on here a long time, as the fading color only aided the pressure. But, there was something else that utterly baffled me—I had seen this graffiti before. On that foggy day…

"Beautiful, isn't it? Nobody knows about it. It's my personal oasis. The person who wrote it may have forgotten about it, too."

I didn't miss the tag that was next to the lion. It was a round ghost, with the letters **BOO** written next to it.

"…Boo-san did this?"

"That's right. This is the only work of hers that still remains. It's her masterpiece. You can feel it, right?"

"Somewhat…It's a sheer wave of killing intent."

It honestly scared me. The lion was definitely sleeping. Looking at the blood dripping from its fangs, you could tell it had just finished its hunt. It killed its foe, devoured it, and is now resting. It couldn't hope

to compare with the other graffiti around. If anybody dared to attempt and overwrite this, the lion would probably take them as its next prey. That's what the graffiti would make you think.

"Killing intent! I knew you had a sharp look, Yoshi-kun. Yeah, you are absolutely right." George nodded several times, putting his hands in his pockets, and muttered while looking at the lion. "Boo isn't interested in anything other than winning. This graffiti tells you more than enough of that. Is it the same even now? I honestly don't know."

I looked around, spotting something. On the opposite side of the wall, there was a narrow staircase. So this place…wasn't a dead-end after all. If so, that writer I saw back then escaped up those stairs when they threw the spray can at me. But if that wasn't a hallucination or a ghost, but a regular human being…Could it have been Boudicia? And if it was…The graffiti in front of me seemed relatively old, so she couldn't have written it that night. If so…maybe she planned on overwriting it. Her own art…by herself.

"So that secret you mentioned…is it this graffiti?" I returned to my senses and asked George.

"I've never actually told anybody this." He said with a smile, and… "**I actually like Boo,"** he said without any glimmer of hesitation.

I was once again at a loss for words. George…and Boudicia. Thinking about it, it wasn't that odd of a match. He's one of the few people who actually looks after her. It sounded absolutely plausible. And yet…for some reason, I found myself unable to accept those words.

"We got to know each other because of our parents. She's always been like a little sister to me, and she was like that since she was a little brat. Not honest at all, latching at everybody and everything, but deep down, she's lonely and wants attention. Almost like…"

"…a stray cat?"

George snickered.

"I didn't ask to pick her up or anything…But I did confess to her when we were in school. She did reject me…despite the flower

bouquet I got for her."

A flower bouquet…in school? That is very much something that George would do. And I can practically see Boudicia blowing a fuse. What a sight that would be. All this time, I had seen George as someone who's clever, passionate, and always composed. That, of course, hasn't changed. However, right now, he had his hands stuffed in his chest, showing a sensitive expression. It made me realize that George was just another human, like me.

And looking at him like this, I wondered. George may have liked Boudicia…but what about her? Did she reject him solely because she couldn't be honest with her own feelings? No…Knowing George, he would have seen through that right away. But even so, he had to bring that flower bouquet with him.

"Well, enough about my own feelings. It's all in the past. As for what I'm trying to say…Boo's talent shouldn't rot away in a place like this. I would give so much for her to make a return." He narrowed his ashen-colored eyes.

His expression, filled with determination, surprised me.

"But…no matter what I do, she'll remain stubborn," he said, to which his expression returned to his usual soft one I was used to.

"That's why…I think you're the one who holds the key to all this, Yoshi-kun. You're my final ace in the hole to break up this situation."

"Not Boo-san…but me?"

"I can tell right now."

His smile was so mysterious. What role would there for me be to play? And since he wouldn't tell me now, it was probably better for me not to know now.

"…Um."

"Yes, yes?"

"You know the reason…why Boo-san stopped writing, right?"

“Mmm, good question. And yes, I do know. And I would like you to know, too,” he spoke that far, only to show a saddened smile. “But I can’t tell you. All I can confess…is this little secret of mine.”

He was right. But even so, I was glad that I asked. It let me make up my resolve…to face this lion in front of me.

“Anyway, I have to take my leave now…I’m counting on you, Yoshi-kun.”

As he passed me by, he placed his hand on my shoulder, which filled me with heat.

*

The city was covered with it. Graffiti of a bear wearing a pirate’s head, holding a spray can. And thanks to George teaching me, I was able to read the bubble letters next to it—**Revolution**. This graffiti appeared all over town. However, it wasn’t just written on the walls. There were also posters with pictures of the graffiti everywhere, with a date that would arrive in one week, adding an explanation below that—**Writers, gather at the Bearpit.**

Wherever you went, you could see that poster. I’m sure citizens and police must have gone around tearing them down, but they could not combat the sheer number. It changed the scenery of the town as a whole. And I immediately knew who had written this graffiti. And who put up the poster, too. It was a shock at first but didn’t leave me breathless. It was more like…the anticipated situation finally arrived in front of us.

Even so, it left my heart restless. A large storm was slowly brewing up within Bristol. And I rushed to the Bearpit. Because I knew something would happen there. When I rushed down the stairs, I was immediately greeted by an overwhelming sight. The usually empty Bearpit was filled to the brim with people. They each wore different clothes and outfits, but there was no room for debate—they were writers. Or people from the underground of Bristol. They probably rushed here after they’d seen the posters…Just like I have. And as I looked around, I realized that the whispering voices filling the Bearpit slowly vanished. Following after, I saw familiar beryl green

hair sway up on a stage—Lara.

“All of you from Bristol…Thank you for coming today. I’ll cut through the introductions. You must know who I am…and it doesn’t matter right now. Compared to the situation before us, that is.” She spoke into the megaphone she held in her hand, and the pit turned quiet. “The city council decided to purge the Bearpit.”

Commotion spread. She stood on that stage, despite her small body. Gathering the attention of hundreds of people.

“*Why* is that? It’s because they underestimate us.” Her clear voice was amplified through the speakers, filling the Bearpit.

I was overwhelmed. All I could do was watch her speech in silence.

“They treat people like us…Treat writers like insects that need to be exterminated. They think that graffiti is just dirt that should be removed. Do you agree with them? Do you really think that this city without its graffiti…would be a better Bristol?”

The people answered instantly, screaming “No!” at the top of their lungs. Hearing this, Lara opened her arms and formed a fist.

“Bristol gave birth to a single hero—His name…was Banksy. He wrote graffiti in order to save this town. And right now, the city council has put his work into the art museum. It is quite the irony… but thanks to him, Bristol’s graffiti was elevated to art itself. That’s why we managed to come all this way. And what Banksy has given us…we cannot let go of. No matter what!” Her voice spoke with confidence and vigor. “I’m sure you’ve all seen the graffiti at Clifton Suspension Bridge. I can’t tell you who did it, but I’ve met them. And he said…he wanted us to know that there was nothing impossible for us. That’s why…there’s only one thing to do. We have to fight…with our graffiti!”

Her voice filled the Bearpit, and the people listening joined in. It was like a loud echo effect came into action.

“In one week…We will write our graffiti. Crews and factions don’t matter. We have to create one work, all of us together. Where? Here,

in the Bearpit! We will use this whole space…to create one singular work. And then we'll show the city council…that we writers…and our graffiti…are a culture that is worth protecting!"

As she stood atop that stage, her bluish-green hair looked like a flame. Her passion, her heat, it was all conveyed directly to the people listening.

"This is a *revolution*! In one week, this city will change. And the people from the city council will learn…that we were the ones who created the culture of this town! ***We are Bristol***!" Her fist bumped into the air creating a roar of cheers.

We are Bristol—Their chants growing louder and louder. She then gave the megaphone to Peni and got off the stage. Seeing that, I slipped past the crowd and rushed to the side of the stage. As expected, she was surrounded by people, but when she saw me, she raised her hand and said *Excuse me* to the people.

"Yoshi! So you've come. Did you hear my *speech*?"

"Yes, of course."

Her face was read, as she was out of breath. I knew how exhausting it can be to stand on top of a stage like that.

"Our Captain's amazing, don't you think?!"

"It's the real deal of charisma!"

JF and Peni said so, and I had to agree. This must be Lara's talent. I feel like she has it…A soul.

"Yoshi, there's something I need to talk with you about. Can you come with me?"

"Me? Really?"

"Yes. It has to be you."

"Oh…Sure."

“JF, Peni, you take care of the rest. Yoshi, after me!”

Lara suddenly grabbed my hand, almost throwing me off balance as I struggled to follow her. JF and Peni were glaring at me as we ran off, but I had a reason to not decline it. It’s because there was something I needed to ask her.

*

We headed down Anchor Road, leaving the Bearpit after us. We crossed the large Lime Kiln Road and entered an older road that seemed to have been part of a citadel. Surrounded by stone-paved walls, we walked down the narrow Gasworks Lane, when my view suddenly opened up. I saw the River Avon, as well as a small harbor. It was created with stone, lining up small boats that were probably made for personal use, as well as restaurants and cafes. Unlike the bristling Bearpit and its oppressive heat, this place was calm and almost relaxing.

“Um, Lara-san?”

She remained silent all the way here, walking along the river. Eventually, I called out to her.

“What?” She turned around.

Her white skin shone as a reflection of River Avon.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“Well…I’m sorry to have you run for a loop like this. I didn’t want the people from the Bearpit to hear what I’m about to discuss,” her faint smile my heart skipped a beat.

The dignified leader standing atop the stage during her speech was nowhere to be found.

“I have…something to ask of you, Yoshi.”

“…What would that be?”

“The upcoming event has to be a success no matter what. Failure…is

not allowed. Because the fate of Bristol depends on it. After the incident with Aeon, this will be covered on the news. It might even turn into a historical event."

"That…I am well aware of."

Listening to her speech, that was all too clear. She's trying to change this city, and I'm witnessing that very moment in time.

"On that day, we will all write graffiti at the Bearpit. That's why…the spot up on the stage should be reserved for only the greatest graffiti. The shining beacon, so to speak. You understand, right?"

"Yes."

"I'd like Boo to be the one to write there," she said, her gaze piercing me.

"…So you want me to convince Boo-san to write?"

A gust of wind ran along the river, passing us by. In unison, Lara showed a defeated smile.

"I do like Boo, but…I fear we might just get into a fight again."

I remembered their previous exchanges. And they definitely could get along. However, that's also why Boudicia won't listen to Lara. Because Lara is writing, and Boudicia isn't. That part is much more important than it might seem. And as the wild building that she is, it's hard to see weakness with Boudicia.

"I'll talk to her."

Though I doubt she'll actually listen to me.

"Also…why are you not the one to draw there, Lara-san?"

Looking at how everyone cheered for her before, it would make sense that she'd also take the spotlight.

"I understand where you're coming from. But…when you ask me Ghost or Captain, then…I've never once even won against the Ghost."

Lara's sigh was carried away by the salty gush of wind.

I, personally, was surprised. I thought they were battling that whole time. And because they were like them, she could see the difference in their ability.

"Boo's right. I rely too much on my crew, like the naked queen. I'm just a bit better at talking than the average person. But, my graffiti won't be able to reach them. Not the hearts of the people."

When she stood on that stage, her passion filled the entire plaza. But now that we were away from the Bearpit, she looked fragile and small.

"I can't do anything on my own. But even so…No, exactly for that reason, I need help. And although I don't like to admit it, you're probably the only person for the job, Yoshi."

"…I'm not too confident, so don't count on me."

"That's fine. If I go, we'll just end up in another fight."

"Okay. I'll go talk to her."

Seeing Lara's defeated smile, I felt the urge to do something myself. For Lara…But also for Bristol, and the graffiti culture that is alive here. I wanted to add to something, no matter how small it may be. If I hadn't known about graffiti prior to this, I probably would have not cared at all, just calling it random doodles. I might have even agreed with the city council. But…now things are different. Graffiti holds meaning to me. And so does the Ghost of Bristol.

"…Lara-san, there's something I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

The wind here near the river felt great. And while I glanced at the small boats, I continued.

"Why do you write graffiti?"

"*Oh dear*." Lara blinked as she put one hand on her backpack. "I

really believed you'd ask if I had a boyfriend." She smiled in a teasing way, as she closed in on my face.

"Huh? Wait, what? Why would I…"

"What's that reaction…? How rude." She joked around for a moment but quickly dropped her gaze, turning serious again. "Well…I guess it might be a good thing for you to hear this."

The sky was clear, with a blue wall above us. And even though it was fall, the sunlight felt warm. Blessed by this weather, Lara continued to walk as her big boots clacked.

"I write…because I love this town." She said and smiled, as the wind played with her green hair. "Write, be overwritten, and write again. I like how everything fits inside a cycle. It really creates this feeling that the town is alive. And because I love it here, I want it to continue this way." Lara walked up a set of stairs and then stopped at the top, looking at the scenery around her once. "That's why…I don't mind if my graffiti is overwritten. But, keep this a secret from my crew. It'd just dampen their motivation," she said and placed her index finger on her lips, as she smiled. "Yoshi, have you ever heard of Blackbeard?"

"Yes, once."

Or so I responded, but I couldn't think of anything. Rather, my first image belonged to a toy of a pirate with a purple bandana stuck in a barrel, and each stab with a sword raised the danger of him popping out.

"Blackbeard…Edward Teach actually was born here in Bristol. He wanted to create the greatest pirate crew in the world, only to clash with the marine. Even in his final moments, they say he fought with all his being."

The white boats in the distance crossed the river. Lara continued to walk ahead, and I followed after I took a quick breath.

"Even the greatest graffiti will one day vanish. And I will be able to write eventually. That's why…I want to write for someone else's

sake. If my graffiti motivated someone else to write, then the graffiti here in Bristol will continue on."

"That's why you're the Captain, I see."

"Heh, something like that. The name **Queen Bear's Revenge** comes from the name of the ship Blackbeard was on. Even if I die, the ship will remain. And I think that is sufficient."

Graffiti is work created by an individual. And even so, there exist whole crews. Up to this point, it was a mystery to me. But after hearing her argument, it made more sense to me. And I understand where all her charisma came from.

"I told you…I never once felt like I had won against the Ghost. Her graffiti…It's like her whole life is on the line. Like a wild beast with sharp teeth, waiting for its next prey. And honestly, I think I'm fine with losing. I don't have that kind of ferocity. Even if I happen to be reborn."

I remembered Boudicia's graffiti that George showed me. A wild beast…Ferocity…It's exactly as Lara said. She then looked into the distance.

"That's why…I don't know why someone as dreadful and aggressive as the Ghost would suddenly stop writing altogether."

That's right…Why would she stop? Boudicia said that she and I are similar. And if that was the case…

"Leaving that aside…Yoshi, there is one thing I must tell you." Lara pointed at me, the hill at her back.

"Yes?"

"I won't give you Boo, okay?!"

The sun at her back was incredibly dazzling that I couldn't even look directly at it.

*

I was laying in my bed at Manor Hall, looking up at the ceiling. Needless to say, I was thinking about Boudicia. I remembered her smile after we split up on the game night. Back then, she didn't look like she was in pain…She didn't seem like she was suffering. At the very least, not on the surface. Does she really not want to write? Is she fine not writing? She said she didn't like writing graffiti. She's not enjoying it. Those were her words. And I think she meant that. But at the same time, she stated that we were similar. In that sense, she may be right. I don't like making music. I don't particularly enjoy it. And even now, I have yet to even touch my guitar once after coming here.

I pushed up my body and opened the case—Inside is the Honey Blonde Telecaster. As the name suggested, it was colored in a faint honey-colored yellow, made of wood, and your average guitar. Even just opening the case made my breathing feel heavy, so I pulled up the zipper. I can live on even without playing music. And the same thing could be said about Boudicia.

But then, I remembered Aeon's words. Life is like a never-ending spray paint…but what will that spray paint draw? I don't have any music I desperately want to play. I'm different from our vocalist. But thinking that far, a thought raised through my mind. Why didn't I leave my guitar back in Japan? If there was a time for me to play the guitar again…What would my reason be? The golden-yellow color of my guitar reminded me of Boudicia's hair. If we resemble each other…then deep down in her heart, she must want to hold the desire to draw again.

Just like me…And I want to grant that wish. But how can I save her heart? My music…has no soul. In reality, I knew exactly what I was lacking. I just hesitated…Averted my eyes from it. The answer is always simple…which makes everything so complicated. And then…I reached for the guitar once more. For Boudicia, as well as for my own sake.

"Why'd you call me out here?" Boudicia spotted me on the park bench and grumbled.

Brandon Hill Park was right to the north of the Bearpit. It even reminded me of parks in Japan. The entire hill was practically turned into a singular park, filled with people panicking on the grass, people

reading books, and children running around playing. And with the sheer size, it didn't feel packed, which made it the perfect place.

"Boo-san."

"Yeah?"

"There's something I'd like you to listen to."

"You better make this worth my time." She yawned.

"It might not be worth your time. It's probably pointless."

"Geez, you're not making any sense!"

"Even so, I want you to listen."

Boudicia showed a bewildered expression. I carefully put the case next to me on the ground, opening the zipper.

"…Yoshi, are you…" Her facial color changed.

I readied my guitar. It felt heavier than I remembered. I played a few cords, tuning it. Even that alone made me feel uncomfortable. My hands were shaking, and it was hard for me to breathe. Pull yourself together…You can fade later all you want.

"The song is called Idioteque by Radiohead," I said with a voice about to disappear, as my throat felt like it was being crushed.

I took a deep breath and then began playing. It was the raw sound, as I had no amplifiers or speakers. It's a song I like from a band I adore. Except, I rearranged it and played it for myself, without anybody ever listening. It's the song I've played over and over…and yet, my body wouldn't move. I can't put any strength into my fingers. I can't even breathe properly. Did it even make any sound? It's just like white noise. What I played…suddenly turned vague. And without the talented vocals, I had to make do with my own. Except, my voice wouldn't come out. Each time I opened my mouth, it felt like water came gushing inside. Inside my head, I heard the words from my nightmares—It has no soul.

“You don’t have a soul.” Every single time I remember those words, I’m overcome with the urge to vomit. That I want to start crying like a little child…That I can’t breathe anymore. But, I still don’t stop. Even if I fall and trip, even if I shake in my boots, I want to pull through until the bitter end. If I can do that…then I don’t need a soul. Right now, I need to tell Boudicia something. For that reason…I will play my guitar and sing. If it’s for her, I can play my guitar and sing. And while doing so, I repeated the last line over and over.

Here I’m allowed everything all of the time.

Here I’m allowed everything all of the time.

Again and again…Until I reach that place I belong to. Again and again…Until I realized that the song was over. And at the same time, the final note I played vanished into the sky. I was completely drenched. Like I had been playing under a waterfall. I tried to say something but just started coughing.

“…Okay, I get it. It’s okay.” Boudicia looked close to breaking out in tears as she touched my arm with her left hand.

I sank down on the bench, placing the guitar next to me. I couldn’t say a word. And Boudicia remained silent, too, just rubbing my back. This silence continued for a while.

“Listen, Yoshi.”

“…Yes.”

I struggled but managed to respond.

“It’s your win.”

Normally, she’d laugh it off like a joke. And yet, now, she wasn’t smiling.

“I lost. The thing is, I—”

I interrupted her and raised one hand.

“Boo-san, I’d like to ask something of you.”

Our promise was that she'd tell me the reason she's not writing graffiti anymore. However, I felt like there was something even more important than that. Because…we both have to move forward.

"I want you to write."

"Yoshi…"

"Lara-san said that she never once felt she'd won against the Ghost. That's why…she wants you to be the one to write the centerpiece at the Bearpit on the day of the revolution. She said that her graffiti does not have the strength to move the hearts of people."

"I see…So Lara said that…" Boudicia lowered her head, gazing at her hands.

"…I don't know if that's the truth or not. But, I also want to see your graffiti."

"…Same here." She raised her head.

Her eyes seemed even clearer than usual.

"But can I? Can I write again…like you just played your guitar?"

"I'm sure." I gave an immediate response. "I pulled it off, too."

She laughed like a weight had fallen off her shoulders…like she was relieved about something.

"Yeah, right. And if you can do it, it's a piece of cake for me." She slowly closed her hand and opened it again. "You played the guitar for my sake, so I also…" She didn't finish her words, but I knew.

After that, we stayed silent, just sitting next to each other. Only the breeze rocking the grass created any sound.

*

"Welcome, everyone! Were you waiting? I bet you were! I was as excited about this as my birthday when I was young! Why, you ask? Because today is the day that we change Bristol! We will be

remembered! We will bury this place in graffiti! All of the Bearpit will turn into our masterpiece! And we'll be the writers. We will change it with our own hands! Today is the day of the revolution! We will become a legend! Our story will become a tale for the generations! And today, this city will be reborn! It will be our city! Happy Birthday! And we'll show those folks from the city council… That **we are Bristol**!"

JF stood inside a DJ booth built next to the stage, giving an announcement. And then, the stomping of hefty boots could be heard across the whole Bearpit. Over this whole week, the city was buried in posters. Everybody knew that the city council was planning on cleansing the Bearpit. And that the writers of Bristol intended to fight back. It wasn't just posters, either. Some writers put their own graffiti on the walls, as the entire town was filled with a tense atmosphere.

And today is the day. For that reason, the Bearpit was practically burning up in passion and excitement. Not even the concert of a famous musician would be able to top this. Expectedly so, as all the people gathered here were graffiti writers themselves. They were artists themselves. I still don't know a lot about this community. However, I was very much aware that Bristol's writers were some of the all-stars of the scene. And with all these people…a revolution may very well be possible. At the same time, Lara went up the sage, as she received a microphone from JF.

"I don't think we need any more words than this. What's important is just one thing…" She threw the beryl green spray can into the air, accepted it again, and pushed it into the sky. "***Let the revolution begin***!"

Cheers followed. And then, you could hear the noise of paint being sprayed everywhere. The strong stench of solvent filled my nose. All the writers present began working on their graffiti. Meanwhile, the citizens had surrounded the Bearpit, watching this unfold. And surprisingly enough, they didn't seem afraid or terrified in the slightest. In fact, they were observing this with excitement and curiosity. Even some parents pointed at the graffiti, showing it to their children.

"JF, was it? Despite being some giraffe, he knows how to talk."

Boudicia seemed surprised when Lara called out to her.

“Of course. He’s a musician after all,” Lara said like it was so obvious, but I was bewildered.

“Wait, for real?”

“He is a writer, but under his artist name DJ JF, he’s fairly famous.”

Coffee maker, graffiti artist, and DJ. A jack of all trades, almost.

“But more importantly, I should get to writing myself.” Lara closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“What’s gotten into you? This ain’t your first rodeo, right?” Boudicia called out to her.

“Oh, shut up!” Her voice was quivering slightly, depicting how nervous Lara really was.

“You’re supposed to be their Captain, so pull yourself together!”

“Hmph, maybe I should have taken the main role today, after all.”

Their words were sharp, but I could tell they meant no harm.

“Let’s go at it like we’re out to kill.”

“I plan on living on, thank you.”

Boudicia stretched out her left hand, and Lara reciprocated with a fist bump. Despite all the commotion, I could hear the sound of their fists touching. Lara then ran off to an empty wall, shook her spray can, and began writing on the wall. Her strokes showed no hesitation whatsoever. Every single movement was perfect, as more colors were added, the coloring mostly consisted of blue and green, with some pink. It really was very much like Lara.

The other writers were also writing on the walls of the Bearpit. All the graffiti was overwritten at once. And every single work was brimming with a burning passion. Right now, they all became one giant stream, causing a revolution. The artists who’d always battle

with each other now worked for one common cause. Or rather—They were turning their own way of living into one giant piece of art. Even the pungent stench of spray now felt like I was invited into a big family.

The center of the wall up on the stage was left for Boudicia. And even though she should have started writing at this point, she still stood at the top of the stairs, her backpack at her feet.

“Boo-san.”

Amidst all the chaos, I called out to her.

“Yoshi.”

“It’s okay.” I gently placed my hand on her back.

“…Yeah.” She said with a quiet voice I could barely pick up.

But as she walked up the stairs with her thick sneakers, she turned around one more time.

“*Good luck*.”

Even as I called out to her one more time, the tension didn’t vanish from her face. Her expression seemed tormented, which made me feel anxious. Will she be able to write? She should be. Who else would believe in her…if not me? But…

“Maybe she’s feeling tense because of what I said?” Lara stooped next to me, seemingly having finished her graffiti.

She had her arms crossed, looking at Boudicia.

“Who knows.”

Boudicia dropped her bag on the floor, grabbing a spray can with her right arm. She pointed it at the wall, raising it. And then—she stopped. The feeling like something was off continued to grow inside of me. It’s not that I don’t have faith in her, but…there’s something else that’s not right.

“Hey, Yoshi. You sure she’s okay?”

Boudicia looked like she was moving to start spraying, only to move up. What Lara said was right. Something’s off. But before I could confirm what exactly that was, a sharp voice cut through the noise.

“The police are here!”

Police officers stood at the entrance of the Bearpit, wearing their bright yellow safety vests. They had large transparent shields in one hand, carrying police batons in the other.

“H-Hold on! I’ve received permission from a city council official for this event! What do you want here?!” Lara stood in front of a police officer.

Voices of shock and terror ran through the Bearpit.

“What are you referring to? Do you think we would allow you to vandalize this place?”

“What?! No, you need to check that with the city council!”

“If you intend to make excuses, then you should work harder on those. We’re here under the orders of the city council.”

Behind the police officer stood different officers wearing other uniforms, entering the Bearpit. There must be twenty people at least, if not more. They formed a line, ensuring that nobody could leave.

“…Everyone! Cease your act of public property destruction and disband immediately!” The first police officer screamed into his megaphone.

However, that first request was met with severe booing from the writers. Not a single person planned on leaving the Bearpit behind. And Lara didn’t falter either, despite standing at the frontlines and looking almost comically smaller than the man with his equipment. Meanwhile, the citizens around the Bearpit watched this in uneasiness.

“We’ve received orders. To cleanse this place, that is.”

“Cleanse…you say…?” Lara’s fist quivered as she screamed. “This is the place we’ve inherited! The *garden* we have raised! You and your foul values have no right to enter our safe haven!”

“Heh…A garden? This? I just see a hellhole crawling with insects.”

“And you wouldn’t see any flowers without butterflies or bees!”

“Now, don’t get too heated. We’re just taking out the rash so we don’t get any maggots.”

“The real trash is you! We artists helped Bristol become the city it is today! There are a lot of people who find joy in watching over our graffiti! Banksy’s graffiti can be gazed upon in the art museum, and yet you don’t understand its value! You don’t think about a damn thing! You don’t look at anything! Don’t feel a thing! You aren’t Bristol…It’s us!”

And now, Lara’s back looked incomprehensibly tall. It’s like she was a tall dragon, spewing at the knight who carried a sword and shield. And surely, I wasn’t the only one who felt this way. After all, the other writers cheered and roared in unison. Even the citizens applauded. Seeing that, the police were at a standstill.

“Now, Ghost! Show them! Show Bristol’s number one…your graffiti!”

Lara pointed up at the stage. The writers, police, citizens…All the gazes inside the Bearpit focused on Boudicia.

“Ugh…”

And yet, she still stood frozen. She held the spray can with her right hand, not moving. I could tell that she had begun to sweat. She narrowed her eyes. Yet everyone was watching over her. Waiting… for her to create magic. Except, I just felt restless. The image I had of Boudicia and the sight in front of me did not match up. Her hand, holding the spray can, was shaking. Like a spinning top coming to a slow, like a car slowly dropping its speed, her hand began to shake greater. And then, memories flashed up in my mind. When we first met…the fact that she’s bad at cleaning…the fact her writing isn’t clear and easy to read…what happened at the Giants Cave…when we played games. All this created a hypothesis in my mind.

Everyone in Bristol, in the Bearpit, was hoping for her to write. And I’m sure she wants to write herself. Because writing right here… would certify her absolute victory. Maybe she lacks confidence after not having written anything for a long time. But, she decided to win. And she hates losing. That was always to her, and yet—She wouldn’t write. Could that really be possible? Maybe…

"…It's no good." I raised my voice

"Huh?"

"Boo-san can't write!"

"What do you mean? I thought she wanted to write again?"

"It's not that she doesn't want to…She **can't**!"

"Yoshi, calm down!"

"…Pointless, all of it."

Right as Lara called out to me, the police officer sighed once and returned to his senses.

"Disband right now! If not, we'll be using force to clean up this place!"

"Stop it!" Lara howled as she grabbed onto the police officer.

However, she got shaken off right away, falling to the ground.

"…! You…!" She stood up and once again leaped at the police officer.

He had his shield ready, swinging down the police baton at her. Lara protected herself with both her arms. However, the baton didn't touch her.

"Grrrr…!"

"JF! You?!"

The one to get between her and the baton was JF, the baton biting into his back. He groaned in pain, as his tall back looked broken from protecting Lara.

"Why?!"

"Heh…Why not? Can't have those hounds hurt the Captain's precious arms…"

Watching this unfold, the writers couldn't remain quiet. Screams filled the air—declaring the beginning of a war. The writers tried to fight, but the police officers intervened. Fists and roars flew. But to me, it felt surreal. When the police came storming into the raves…is this what Banksy saw before?

"Yoshi! Take care of Boo!"

Hearing that voice, I was pulled back to reality. Boudicia was about to be restrained by a police officer. Her arm was grabbed, as she was dragged off the stage. She was gasping for air, seeming tired and slumping. She's the same as me…when I couldn't play the guitar.

"Boo-san!"

"Yoshi!"

Our eyes met. Her blue eyes wavered.

"Save me."

It wasn't even really a voice. But, I could hear it clearly. A police baton grazed my head. A spray can flew toward me, but I crouched down and avoided it. I lowered my body and started running, stomping on the aluminum stairs as I ran up the stage. Boudicia tried to escape the police officer, fighting as best as she could. When I stood on the stage, I looked around the Bearpit once and came to a halt. Why am I even here? What am I doing?

Not until too long ago, I was in Japan. I was attending a regular university, playing in a band. And yet, I now stand in the center of a battlefield. It's unbelievable to me. And on top of that, the city council and the police…were my enemy. And even so, I felt no hesitation. Because I lost against Boudicia, and I have yet to fulfill my promise. That I would listen to whatever request she may have…And now, she asked me—To save her.

"Graaaaaaaah!"

I ran my body into a police officer. The transparent shield was a lot more sturdy than it looked, leaving the police officer unharmed. However, that was plenty.

“W-Waaah?!”

The police officer lost his balance, as he let go of Boudicia’s hand and fell off the stage.

“Boo-san!”

However, Boudicia lost her balance and was about to fall herself. I reached for her with my hand. I grabbed her wrist and then felt an impact.

“Ugh…!”

I held onto the stage with my other hand, managing to find a solid hold. The police officer who had fallen off didn’t get back up again. While I held onto her hand, I could see her face. She was tearing up. Normally, she would always complain, always grumble, and could never motivate herself for something. But in reality…she was probably crying deep down. I wanted to know more about her…And I thought I did. But, I was foolish. I didn’t know a damn thing about her. About the true Ghost of Bristol.

I put strength into my arm, using my whole power’s force to successfully pull her up. My arm hurt…and it felt like my shoulder would pop out any second. But, at least she was safe now. Boudicia was still bewildered, struggling to breathe, but she seemed more relaxed than before.

“Yoshi…I…” She tried to say something, but I interrupted her.

“I’m sorry, Boo-san. I didn’t know a thing. I just thought about myself…and yet didn’t even look at you properly.”

Boudicia’s eyes opened wide.

“I was the one who brought you here, so I will take responsibility and get you out of here. Is that okay?”

She nodded faintly, and that’s all she said. I had her at my back, going down the stage. The exit of the Bearpit was originally blocked off by a wall of police officers, but that was broken up now. We just have to get away. And yet, another police officer stood in front of us.

And with Boudicia like this, there was nothing for me to do. Is this… the end? No, think. There must be something…!

“Raaaaaah!”

But before I could think, a low roar broke up the tension. A hefty boot rammed right into the police officer, knocking him to the ground.

“Lara-san!”

After landing beautifully on her two legs, Lara put one hand on her hip.

“Hmh, causing chaos on my own ship. No way the Captain could remain calm during this situation. I’ll have them walk the plank.”

“Where’s JF-san?”

“…I don’t know. He was probably captured.”

“No!”

“Enough. You have to go, Yoshi.”

“But…”

“Listen. JF protected me. But more than that, he wanted to protect the future of graffiti. And this future lies on Boo’s shoulders. If you really care about JF…then get away from here!”

“…I understand.”

Even if I can’t accept it, even if I don’t want to go, I have to make my decision. Because the spray of life keeps writing even now…At this very moment.

“Hey, let go!”

I turned around and saw Lara being restrained by a police officer.

“Boo! I’m sorry, but please look after Bristol…!”

We turned our back towards her scream and ran away from the Bearpit.

Advertisement

Chapter 5: “By the Angel”

“Boo-san.”

“…”

“Are you…okay?”

After that, I pulled Boudicia with me, as we ran toward my student dorm at Manor Hall. I thought of escaping to the 8-Bit World, but that was too dangerous. At the student dorm, outsiders aren’t allowed entry, so the police won’t suddenly come storming inside. Granted, Boudicia is an outsider, too, but that was something I had to ignore for now. Carrying Boudicia on my back, I ran up the hill road, as I took my key out of my pocket. I let Boudicia down on the bed, as my body sunk onto the small sofa in the corner of the room.

Boudicia turned her head around, staring at the wall opposite of me without saying a word. I took a deep breath and sighed. That incident just now felt like a lie, that’s how calm the inside of the dorm was. Only the faint chirping of the birds reached my ears. However, nothing was resolved. All I did was shelter Boudicia. What about after this…?

“Damn it…”

At first, it was a quiet voice. However, it quickly became more violent, eventually changing into an angry roar.

“Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!” She screamed as she pushed up her body, punching everything around her. “Why? Why?!”

“Boo-san!”

A pillow was flung at me, and when she wanted to grab the next item, her hand stopped. She held it in her left hand, staring at it. It

was a spray can—The silver can with the number 94 on it. It was the can I picked up on that foggy day.

“This is…” She lowered her arm and stared at the spray can. “Why do you have that?”

“So it was you after all.”

“Then that day…the person I saw was…”

“Yes. That was me.”

“I heard somebody coming, so I panicked and…”

“We never even properly saw each other, right? I had no idea it was you, Boo-san.”

Boudicia slowly sat back down on the bed. When she ran away back then, I thought she was some sort of ninja, but a graffiti writer surely would know how to get away from a location like that. What really caught my attention was what she planned to do.

“Boo-san…what were you thinking of doing back then?”

“…Overwrite it.”

“But not just any overwriting, right?”

Now I know. This spray can…is a Montana White. And she didn’t have a backpack or anything else with her. *When overwriting, write something that is more complicated or skilled than the previous work*. She should know that rule more than anybody else. And with just white spray paint, she would have no hope of achieving something on the same level as that.

“You’re so attentive to the smallest details…Yeah, that’s right. I was planning on erasing that.” Boudicia faintly shook her left hand, which led the spray can to rattle. “I really despised that drawing. And yet, it’s been there this entire time. It was getting on my nerves.”

“Why…do you despise it?”

“No clue, honestly. When I first wrote it, I was happy about it. But now…it’s different.”

I somewhat understood what Boudicia was trying to say. She wrote her graffiti solely for the purpose of winning. In my memory, that graffiti was awe-inspiring…but it was also savage.

“That’s why…I wanted to turn a blank page by erasing my graffiti and leaving Bristol behind. I decided that I’d never write any graffiti again. Just go somewhere…except I didn’t know where. Japan and its Zen was an option, at least.” She laughed when saying that last part, but her voice sounded defeated. “…If you hadn’t called out to me back then, I probably wouldn’t be here right now.”

She was trying to run away…Just like me. I don’t know if that coincidence was a good thing or not. But…if I hadn’t met her, I probably would never gather any interest in graffiti. And…I would have never gotten to know her like this.

“Just now, I said that I understood everything, right?”

Boudicia had her gaze dropped on the spray can in her left hand, not looking at me. But even so, I continued.

“Boo-san…You’re actually **right-handed**, aren’t you? And…”

She slowly raised her head.

“…**You can’t fully move your right hand**. Am I wrong?”

That foggy day…She held the spray can in her left hand. And that was her only way…to erase the graffiti. Because her right hand wouldn’t move. She was even less of a beginner with her left hand, so the best she could do was cover up her previous work. When she dropped the figure from that shelf at the store when she almost slipped that Giants Cave, she used her right hand. The reason she didn’t like cleaning…is because she couldn’t do it properly. Her handwriting was so hard to read because she was forced to use her non-dominant hand.

So far, I always thought she was left-handed and just a bit clumsy. But, I was wrong. When she tried to write the graffiti at the Bearpit,

she held the spray can in her right hand. If she was really left-handed, then there would be no reason for that. In other words…It's not that she didn't want to write. She simply couldn't…From the very start.

Boudicia remained silent. Instead, she kept seated on the bed, switching the spray can from her left hand into her right. Her white fingers wrapped around the can, slowly raising it up. However, her fingers had already begun quivering. Eventually, the shaking grew out of control, as the spray can fell onto the bed. And then, she looked at me with her blue eyes.

"…Why?"

Unable to show restraint, I asked.

"I told you before. Beat me and I'll fill you in."

"Since I figured out the secret you were hiding, I think this counts as one victory."

"Heh, that's not fair."

I'm well aware that my logic is messed up. But, I didn't care. I've crossed the stage where I had the time to slowly get to know her.

"Or, do you wanna fight it out? I'm confident I could win now."

Boudicia's mouth moved up, forming a faint grin.

"That doesn't sound too bad either."

She pulled down the zipper on her chest and opened her hoodie. In doing so, I could see what she was wearing underneath, as well as her white shoulders. She then turned around a bit, pulling out one arm from inside her hoodie.

"H-Hold on! I didn't mean it like that…!"

Met with the dazzling shine of her skin, I frantically looked away.

"Stop making a fuss and look over here."

“But…”

“No buts.”

I slowly turned my head back toward her, opening my eyes. And then, the sight that opened up in front of me…grasped my heart. I immediately regretted my actions up to this point. Next to the elbow of her right arm, I saw a deep scar, resembling lightning.

“Boo-san, I…I’m sorry.”

She didn’t acknowledge my apology and just reluctantly opened her mouth.

“…Well, it’s a boring story. I found some lame-ass graffiti and overwrote it. The original creator happened to witness me during the act and lashed out at me. We started fighting and…I got stabbed. That’s all there is to it.” She spoke like she was reading the dull summary of a movie she’d seen.

“That’s all…?”

“Seemed like he hit a vital part because I was told I wouldn’t be able to move it as I did before. I figured I could get it fixed by practicing, so I played games for a while…But that didn’t really work out.”

She gripped her hand mid-air and relaxed it again. And even that led to her fingers faintly quivering. She might be able to hold objects with her hand, but detailed movement or even the strength of her grip was out of her control. Now that I think about it, when we played the racing game, she only used the thumb of her right hand to accelerate, and all the detailed movement and such was done with her left hand. She struggled to press the small buttons with her right hand. That would explain why she was so clumsy at times. And…I may have never held a spray can, but I can compare it to playing the guitar. She definitely can’t. Writing anything good with a broken hand like that is impossible.

“…Then why did you accept my request?”

“…I thought I could do it.”

She wasn't playing tough or putting herself down. She simply said so with a defeated expression. But in fact, I have no right to even ask her that. Because…I was the one who pushed her into it.

"Don't make that kinda face. My arm not moving ain't your fault."

"That doesn't matter."

"I kicked him off before he could finish me, so we're equal now."

"That's not the problem here!"

"It's what I did. Sure, it's not like I'm happy about it, but it's not impossible for me to live," she said and put on her hoodie again.

She awkwardly put the zipper together with her left hand and pulled it up.

"But…what was really painful is that…I might have been able to win in graffiti, but that's all. Can't go anywhere. And I was painfully reminded of that…"

I remembered what Aeon once said. He wanted to give others the courage to make the impossible possible. However, that doesn't guarantee that something positive will wait until the end. And if the wall you encounter doesn't teach you anything…Then what are you supposed to do? And Boudicia said it herself. You overwrite something and win. Then your graffiti remains. And this is what brings honor. But…what if there was nothing beyond that? I was painfully aware of how that could feel. After all, I studied and practiced as if my life depended on it…and yet I ran into a wall.

"But…when I heard you play the guitar…I kinda felt like I could write again. Not to win, not for myself, but…"

That's right. She tried to write…for the sake of Bristol. And was it possibly…for my sake?

"…Well, I was just cooking up fantasies in the end." She said, her voice holding a gold and gloomy undertone.

Right when I was thinking of what to say, she thought for a moment

and spoke up again.

“I told you I hated my name ‘Boudicia,’ right?” She didn’t wait for my comment and continued. “It comes from the British Queen Boudica who lived centuries ago. It’s supposed to mean *victory*. But, after she fought against the invading enemy, she still lost. She got beaten up and whipped with a whip. Her two daughters were assaulted. She tried to fight back but eventually killed herself by drinking poison. How would you associate that with victory? What a sick joke.”

I couldn’t say a thing. Surely, that name was given to her as a means of praying for her happiness…But to her, it turned into a burden to carry.

“And this is the result. It ended up exactly as my name prophesized. I’ve got nothing else left. Not even a reason to stay here…or a reason to be alive,” she mumbled and fell backward onto the bed, pulling the blanket up to her head.

“Boo-san…”

I was at a loss for what to say. It would be so simple to just say “That’s not true” and move on. But, I knew more than anybody else… how empty and void that sort of consultation was. Outside the window, the sun had begun to set. The days here in Bristol were especially short during fall. Soon enough, it was dark outside. Then, I heard her faint breathing from my bed, like she’d fallen asleep. She had even taken off her shoes.

“Wait, did you seriously fall asleep?”

Having her sleep here would bring about a lot of problems, so I gently shook her shoulder, but no response came. So much happened today. We ran away from the police and talked about something so grave, and yet…she fell asleep like nothing was wrong. I honestly couldn’t believe it. She really was like a stray cat…or just a wild animal. It felt like she was a bit too careless for her to sleep here, but I was reaching my own limit, too. I leaned against the sofa and gazed up at the ceiling.

I realized how exhausted my body was, begging for rest.

Understandably so, after everything that happened today. I took off my glasses and put them on my desk. As my consciousness was slowly melting away, I thought to myself. Did I make the right choices today? Should she…continue to write? Winning, losing, the method to leave it all behind was simple—To put down the spray paint.

Not drawing any longer wasn't like admitting defeat or failure. She's been fighting this whole time, so she deserved some rest. And, I envisioned a lion sleeping on a large plain field. Leaning against the lion, who faintly moved up and down at every breath, I fell asleep. Enjoying the fluffy and warm fur, it was almost unbelievable that he was on the hunt not too long ago.

*

When I woke up, it was already late. It should have still been dark outside…and yet, the sunlight was so bright. I looked around, but… Boudicia was gone. I jumped up from the sofa. She couldn't be hiding anywhere in this narrow room. I put my glasses on when I spotted a small note written on paper. I picked it up and read it.

[*Goodbye*.]

The memo was written with terrible handwriting. Reading this, I cursed my carelessness to fall asleep right then and there. For starters, I don't believe the police came all the way to grab her. If so, then she must have left on her own desire. Maybe she had gone home…No, that was just wishful thinking. I couldn't believe she would do that. What she told me last night flashed up in the back of my head. She had nothing left. No reason to stay here…or even to be alive.

That foggy day…If she had erased her final graffiti, she would have left Bristol. The fact that I ran into her…was a coincidence, or you could even call it a miracle. However, that same miracle won't happen again. A part of me wanted to become her strength to keep going. But…I sold myself too high. The Ghost of Bristol is gone.

A terrible premonition filled me, grasping my heart to slowly crush it. I just started running. First, I headed to 8-Bit World. I asked if Radesh

had seen Boudicia, but she apparently never came here. I immediately left and continued to run through Bristol. If she's not here, then my next destination is clear. I headed straight to the Bearpit. Down the stone stairs, I ran through the tunnel until I eventually got out in the open again.

"What…is this…?"

And yet, the sight that greeted me was unlike anything I could have anticipated. The Bearpit—was snow white. All the graffiti had been erased, with fences set up around the vicinity. The stage Boudicia had stood on was no longer, probably torn down yesterday. The wild jungle that was the Bearpit was changed into a barren desert within a day. Only the lonely Ursa bear stood tall in its black and white colors.

"…Yoshi."

I heard someone call my name and turned around when I spotted a small but chubby man.

"Peni-san."

His round face was riddled with bruises and bumps. He must have gotten beaten up by the police yesterday. At the very least, he wasn't arrested…Or so I sighed in relief, but that didn't resolve a damn thing.

"What happened after we left?"

"…We couldn't win against the police," Peni said with his head hanging low. "We fought back and got beaten up without any hope, and then were thrown out. After that, the city council brought these workers with them…and they turned the graffiti…all white…JF got hurt protecting the Captain, who continued to fight until the very end…but even she was captured by the end. I somehow managed to escape, but…How could they do such a thing…? The Captain said she got permission for this…!" Peni grasped his chest.

His heart must hurt much more than his physical injuries.

"I'm so frustrated. Even mine and JF's shop was taken away. Everything we've ever made…was stolen from us."

I looked past the fence. The bus the two of them used to sell coffee and burritos…Even the tables and chairs in front of it…It was all gone.

“Aeon’s shop closed up too. Right now, you can’t even buy a single spray can in Bristol.”

They weren’t naive in the slightest. However, the police were just even more thorough than they anticipated. The police officers stormed the event and crushed all opposition. The Bearpit was cleansed of all graffiti and underground activity. All major writers have been apprehended. The spray business was halted. They set up police to not allow any new graffiti—And Boudicia has vanished. It’s perfect for them. Too perfect…

“The thing is, Boo-san’s gone…”

“No way! Where did she go?!” Peni grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

“That…I don’t know…”

“Ugh…” He groaned, but I didn’t know what to say.

If only I’d stopped her…But, it was too late to regret. I just needed some sort of hint.

“Is the Bearpit off-limits?”

“…They made sure you can’t sneak over the fence, but you can get inside. Then again, with the police, you can’t even write.”

“I’ll go check it out.”

Sure, the chances of Boudicia being here were extremely slim, but I had to confirm it either way. We headed down the steps that turned snow white, entering the plaza. Just as Peni said, several police officers were keeping watch. And the citizens walking past gave it passing glances.

“Everything…is gone.”

“Yeah. Except, there is one graffiti left. Though, I think it’s a completely new one.”

“New? In this situation?”

“I’m guessing the police haven’t seen it yet? It’s over there.”

I followed after Peni and headed deeper inside the Bearpit.

“This right here.”

Just like he said, it was written in a place that wouldn’t stand out too much. And it was probably put here for that reason.

“Yoshi.”

As I was observing the graffiti, Peni called my name.

“This is for you,” he said and put down the bag he was carrying on his back. “I wanted to protect this no matter what. Though I got beaten up badly for it.” He showed a self-deprecating smile as he handed me the bag.

The moment I accepted it, I could hear something rattle inside. It must be the same bag Boudicia carried with her up to the stage.

“You did this all by yourself…”

“I’m not some amazing writer. I’m a pathetic nobody. But when I saw this in front of me, I…”

The bag I accepted with one hand suddenly felt a lot heavier.

“Yoshi, I want you to find the Ghost and tell her. To write another graffiti using this. I want everyone to know…that not everything is gone. That Bristol’s graffiti…hasn’t died yet!”

“Peni-san…”

It was a dear plea, but I couldn’t respond.

“I’ll ask all the writers I know about the Ghost and let you know if I find anything.”

“Please do, and thanks.” I thanked him and watched him run out of the pit.

Once he disappeared out of sight, I turned back toward the graffiti. It was written with black spray, using round letters, which made it look like a sentence. At first glance, it looked like nothing special. However, it was written freshly in this situation, in a place where police officers were patrolling. It might hold some meaning. And while observing the graffiti, I thought to myself.

What if Boudicia was with me right now? She probably would have uncovered the meaning behind this already. But, I shook my head to rid myself of that thought. Pull yourself together. The situation’s different now. I have to find Boudicia. Nobody else can help me. And for that, I took a closer look at the graffiti. With how clear the black color was, it must have been written just recently. After the white spray erased all graffiti in the Bearpit. It didn’t seem like anything that was written out of spite or passion. In fact, it looked fairly average. And that brought up the question of what it actually said.

The particularly deformed letters and writing seemed foreign to me. But, while staring at it for a while…I could see letters of the alphabet form.

“Ah…”

The graffiti told me a message. When I had just come to Bristol, I didn’t know anything. I met Boudicia, got to know George, talked to Aeon, and faced Lara. Even now, I’m not a writer. I wasn’t raised in this town. However, they weren’t strangers to me any longer. And I could hear the voice that spoke to me from the wall.

[At Home Is Princess]

That’s all it said. But, it was plenty for me. The message couldn’t be clearer.

*

Bristol Museum and Art Gallery—The tallest building in all of Bristol, close to the Wills Memorial Building. Of course, compared to the

museum in London or the one in Tokyo's Ueno, it was still comparatively small. Usually, the citizens were allowed to come and go as they pleased, which created a feeling of being welcome. However, the outside appearance signaled dignity and pride. I stood in front of the museum, gazing at it for a moment. The plate hanging above the entrance had the number 1904 written on it. It showed that this museum stood tall here for more than a hundred years.

How many generations must have passed through here? How much art was being admired and loved here? And I stood at the beginning of it all. I instinctively knew that someone was waiting for me up ahead. However, I didn't know what exactly I would have to deal with. Even so, I had to see it with my own eyes. I took a deep breath and entered inside by opening the glass door.

The vast entrance hall was built as an atrium that reached up to the third floor. On both walls hung old paintings, as well as what looked like an Egyptian stone statue. Standing inside the arch of the stairs was a tall oriental bear. It felt odd to stand in a place that gathered objects from across the world. But, I wasn't the only one. The person present in the center of this large place wore his leisure jacket the same way as always, smiling like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm happy you made it here. Welcome to my *home*," George said and opened his arms.

That's right. This place is supposed to be his *home*.

"It was supposed to be closed today, but I really wished for you to come to see me. So I used my connections to keep it open just for today. That being said, all the CCTV cameras are turned off, so nobody will bother us. Wonderful, don't you think?" He turned around with his arms still spread.

His home…his garden. I knew this place probably as well as his own body.

"…So you were the one who wrote the graffiti in the Bearpit."

George smiled as he answered happily.

“I’m glad to see my invitation has reached you. Of course, I had complete faith in you…But you never know what may happen. Don’t you agree?”

“That graffiti was written with bubble letters. That’s why I could read it. Because you taught me about them when we looked at the big graffiti covering the window at the 8-Bit World.” I took one step forward. “Just reading it…I’m not the only one who could do that. But, the only person who could make their way here would have to know that you consider the art museum your *home*. Being able to read that graffiti while connecting the dots…Only I could pull that off.”

If possible, I didn’t want to speak any further than this. However, I took a deep breath and continued.

“George-san, you knew I would come to the Bearpit. No…you were certain of it. Because you knew I would have a reason to do so.”

And that leads me to a single conclusion.

“George-san. Where is Boo-san?!”

“*Bravo*!”

George cheered to himself, clapping his hands. In this empty entrance hall, the shrill sound reverberated several times.

“Truly, you are magnificent. I’m quite confident in my eye for people, see. And what awaits you after you successfully make it to the castle…is the *princess*.”

George vanished into the hall behind him, only to reappear, carrying someone in his arms.

“Boo-san!”

She didn’t seem to be conscious. I was on the verge of running over to her, but George denied that.

“Now, now, let’s not rush things. You see, it was quite simple to abduct the runaway girl…Come on, Boo. Your *prince* has come to

save you.” He put her down in the center of the hall, gently tapping her on the cheek.

“Mmm…” Boudicia groaned once and opened her eyes.

After a brief pause, she jumped up in shock.

“…! Wh-Why am I…?!”

“Boo-san! Are you okay?!”

I ran toward her. This time, George didn’t get in my way. Rather, he stepped away, as if to give us space.

“Yoshi…? Sorry…I wanted to leave Bristol after all, and that’s why…”

“Don’t worry about that! Are you hurt anywhere?!” I inspected her body, but couldn’t see any injuries on her.

“Oh, please. You needn’t worry about that. I simply used a bit of medicine so that she would have a peaceful sleep. I mean, I would have had my way with her if I was so pleased, but as you know…I am a *gentleman*!”

Why would he do such a thing? I didn’t want to bet my money on it, but a single answer popped up in my mind. And I have to confirm that…Because that’s why I came here.

“…George-san. It was you who set up everything, wasn’t it?”

“Oh my, oh my. So I was found out. Well, I felt like it was only a matter of time now.”

“What’s your goal with this?!”

“Oh, Boo…I had figured you would already know, but this pains me greatly. Or maybe you simply can’t accept it. Because…we all know how clumsy and dishonest you are.”

“What did you…?”

“What is my goal, you ask? Please, try to use your head, Roasted Beef-chan. Isn’t that obvious? …It’s to have you write.”

This was different from his regular banter with Boudicia. Like a prosecutor during a trial, he pointed at her.

“Of course, the fact that that punk caused such an injury is definitely unfortunate. However, I can’t have you simply stop without ever writing another thing. Because you are our *muse*. The individual who will change the history of art in Bristol.”

“Don’t give me that crap. Why would you care what I write and where?!”

“But why wouldn’t I care? Come on, consider my feelings for once.”

George completely ignored Boudicia’s howl, as he acted like an aged university professor.

“Let’s assume there is a childhood friend that you’ve always been together with. Even seeing her as a little sister you always doted on. You yourself love art more than anything, always sneaking into the art museum and one day dream of being an artist yourself as you draw in your sketchbook on a daily basis. Then one day, your childhood friend happens to draw something on the wall with a spray can. How would you feel? Not to mention that her talent was *overtly, otherworldly, historically* on a fundamentally different level. That she could possibly even stand shoulder to shoulder with one of the greatest artists of our time…Yes, with Banksy, even.” George’s voice reverberated through the empty museum. “Naturally, you yourself would try to write something on the wall yourself—only to taste true despair. Realizing that you lack all and every critical talent. Boo is absolutely correct. No matter what I do, I will never be more than the parsley left behind on the corner of the plate, eventually ending up in the trash bin.”

George was a writer once. He realized he could never make it anywhere, threw away his spray can, snapped his brush, and remained an average person. Listening to it, it was a story that probably happened countless times. However, this also revealed some of the factors of this incident that had remained unsolved up to this

point.

"…So the graffiti we assumed was written on the shop for the sake of revenge…The one we thought Lara-san was responsible for…It was you all along."

"Indeed. I may have no talent, but there is one thing I excel at… *Replication*. It was a copy from an older graffiti Lara-kun had written at some point. For the sake of anti-graffiti measures…Or under the pretense of such, I regularly walk around town, see. I've recorded countless works. Of course, as part of my hobby, too."

Lara said she wasn't the one who wrote it. And it didn't seem like she was lying about that. At the same time, she disagreed that someone from her crew could have done it. And looking at how much her crew cares for her, it's hard to believe someone would betray her. Thus, it must have been written by someone else entirely. Someone who… had a proper reason.

"You're just copying other people's graffiti…? You have no right to talk about art!"

"I was never an artist, to begin with. I did it for a reason…*For the greater good*, as they say. Though I feel bad for having insulted Lara-kun this way," George said as he continued to smile. "I do have to say, it was quite the fortunate coincidence that Peni-kun would put that graffiti on your shop. I could make it seem like an act of revenge, forcing you to make your way to the Bearpit once more. You then encountered Captain Lara, and figured it would be a good influence for your own desire to draw…But, that wasn't enough. Then again, I expected as much. You're a stubborn girl, so I had to corner you more."

"So you were the one who instigated the purge of the Bearpit."

"Exactly as you say, Yoshi-kun. I pushed the city council's aggressive stance against graffiti. Then, I made my way to the center of the Bearpit to raise a *resistance*. However, Aeon-kun's deed did throw a cog into my plans. I didn't expect him to write that graffiti. He created trouble that almost made things turn south. However, I let him get off scot-free, so please don't mind that."

“Don’t joke with me! Aeon wrote that for the sake of Bristol! He didn’t do it for you!”

“You might be absolutely right. However, it helped me greatly. Thanks to that, the resistance became even more active in their fight against the city council. Much appreciated, much appreciated.”

Boudicia was fuming with anger when suddenly all color drained from her face.

“…Hold on. So the police…was that also you…”

“Indeed, it was. Lara-kun asked me for permission. We may have been in a truce, but I am still her enemy. I admire her courage and resourcefulness, so I agreed to help. I even brought up the idea of having everyone write graffiti. It is the stage that will decide the fate of Bristol’s graffiti. And you have the Prince by your side. Surely, the Princess should awaken…And yet, here we are. You see, I’ve tried my best. Indeed, I asked the city council for permission.”

What sophism. No way the city council would agree. It’s like he was leaking information.

“But Boo-san was in danger, too, right?! What if she had been caught by the police?!”

“I left you by her side for that reason. You are the Knight that feeds on the Pawns so that the Queen can move freely. I told you, didn’t I? I was buying into you.”

“But Lara and JF got caught! Because of what you did!”

“Because of what I did? That isn’t quite right. They were arrested because they wrote graffiti.”

“You damn *liar*!”

“How cruel…Who would say such a thing to their childhood friend?” George put his hands in his pocket and sulked—or pretended to. “Boo…If this is the attitude you intend to have with me, then I need to use desperate measures.” George took out something from his pocket.

“Boo-san!”

It happened in an instant. The object he took out from his pocket shone in a silver light. He grabbed the knife and headed straight for Boudicia. But before I could think, my legs moved. I pushed my body between George and her.

“Yes, that’s exactly it.”

“Huh?”

Right as the knife was in front of me, George pushed my shoulders. I lost my balance and almost fell over, as an arm wrapped around my neck. In the blink of an eye, George had me restrained. I tried to rip off his arm with my own hands, but he tightly held onto me. And when I felt something sharp pressed against my neck, I roared in anger as I understood the situation.

“George, you bastard!”

“Now, now. No moving, okay? Boo, you can see what’s going on right now, can’t you? Really, as long as the blade is within three inches and not a lock knife, you can carry a flip knife around without legal problems. Whoever thought of that, I’m genuinely thankful. If they’d just be a bit more creative with the blade, you could easily kill a single person.”

He anticipated I would try to protect Boudicia and aimed for me from the very start. I thought I was being careful. I figured I knew George. He liked to be prepared. So when he took out the knife and charged at me, I didn’t have time to think. This was George’s win.

“Come on, Boo. Look at this. It’s your fault that your precious Yoshi-kun ended up in this peril.”

“…I’m sorry, Boo-san.”

“Why…Why are you apologizing?! It’s all…it’s all because of me…!”

I couldn’t answer her question. Why did I apologize? I mean, there were so many reasons I didn’t know where to start.

“Stop it! Please, stop! Yoshi has nothing to do with this! This is my problem, right?!”

“Exactly. See, I knew you’d understand. You no writing at all is why our dear Yoshi-kun ended up in this predicament.” George kept the blade of the knife close to my neck, as he removed the backpack I was carrying.

Surely, I could move a bit like this, but one wrong move and he will surely stab me. He then threw the backpack at Boudicia. I could hear the clanking sound of spray paint cans inside, as Boudicia accepted it.

“This is my…”

“You have to write, Boudicia.”

“And where am I supposed to write?”

“You…are a genius. You have the right to overwrite wherever. Even if…it is a historical object.”

“You’re making no sense…”

“I swear…You love to play dumb, don’t you? Then…Yoshi-kun, do you happen to know what this statue is?” George pushed his face closer to me, gently asking me like a teacher or a parent, as he pointed at a statue next to the stairs.

It was—the statue of an angel. She was clad in loose clothes, standing high up on a foundation, as she carried flowers in both her hands. It was a common statue of an angel. The thing that made it stand out… was the fact that you couldn’t look it in the eyes. After all, she wore a paint can over her head. Pink color dripped off of this, reaching down to her chest and legs, even on the foundation she stood on.

“The **Paint Pot Angel**—A sculpture made for the Banksy exhibit that happened here in 2009.”

Banksy—I’ve heard that name many times up to this point. But the fact that there is an exhibit here for him was news to me. Leaving a sculpture like this behind…he crossed the level of simply being a graffiti artist.

“Listen well. The Bearpit incident has gathered attention all over town. As well as the mystery of who would have been the writer kept as the main dish.”

I remembered how all the citizens were watching the events unfold. You could say that the Bearpit is the center of Bristol. Nobody would miss such a ruckus.

“And that’s why…You must write, Boo,” George said as he faintly moved the tip of the blade.

I didn’t know where he was pointing, but his gaze was directed at the backside of the stairs. There stood a tall pedestal, just like the one the Paint Pot Angel stood on. But, nothing was on top of it. Facing the angel…was an empty pedestal. But, what if someone happened to write graffiti on there? The pedestals stood around the stairs in the center hall, right after entering. On one side stood the angel, and on the opposite side, you could probably see the graffiti clearly. They could be regarded as beings who watch over the museum.

“That’s right. Tonight, you will stand on the same level as Banksy. He left one of his works in the museum without anybody knowing, but this time, things are different. You will write your graffiti here. And nobody will be able to look away from your creation. The news will cross the limits of Bristol, reaching the whole world! The Ghost of Bristol…will surpass the Angel!”

He’s gone mad—Is what I thought first thing when I heard George’s voice, who sounded like a child who had just received a new toy for Christmas. He created this whole situation solely to have Boudicia write. He made preparations as the whole mess escalated to ensure that all roads would lead here. And the knife signaling the checkmate was currently touching my neck. His devotion…wasn’t normal.

“Even if you say that, I can no longer…”

“I know. Oh, I know. Your right arm won’t move much anymore, right? *Forget it.*”

His tone made it sound like it was not a problem in the slightest. Boudicia attempted to say something, but no words came out.

“If you’d like to write, I’m sure you can do it. Just one missing arm can’t stop you. You’re just making excuses.”

“I…”

I grit my teeth. He wasn’t sane in the slightest, but his logic made sense. His argument was sharper than the blade of the knife. And I knew…that this argument was invincible against whatever you may say. It really hurt. Because I’ve been running away this whole time for that reason…with that excuse. And yet, I grabbed my guitar for the sake of Boudicia. Sure, her arm was injured and wouldn’t move much. That wasn’t a problem a change in her attitude could fix. That alone can’t be fixed. And even with recovery, she probably won’t be able to write as she did before. However, moving on despite this and not doing anything are two different things.

George wasn’t wrong. But even as Boudicia held the backpack full of spray paint, she wouldn’t move. She had glared at George not too long ago, and now that gaze was dropped down onto the clean museum floor.

“…I feared not even this would get you to write. I swear, you’re such a troublesome child. But, it’s okay. Roasted beef always takes a long time to cook. And I need to slowly turn up the heat for it to turn out just perfect.” George said, speaking extremely lightly of this situation. And then, without any hesitation, he moved the knife—and stabbed it into my arm.

“Gah…!”

Sharp pain assaulted my brain. I groaned and struggled, but George’s arm wouldn’t let me go. The pain wouldn’t stop. I could feel my arm pumping, as Boudicia screamed. I heard the sound of her backpack drop to the ground, with George laughing.

“George, stop it!”

“I told you to write. Yet, you wouldn’t listen. Now here you are, giving me orders? Why would I obey you?”

“This has nothing to do with Yoshi! If you’re gonna hurt someone,

then choose me!”

“Although it pains me to admit it, I’m a bit too clever to do that. I cannot confuse my methods with my goal. I knew that this would be the most effective for you.”

The knife twisted deeper. More pain assaulted me, forcing me to gasp. The blood that should be running through my arm now ran down my fingers, dropping to the ground. Meanwhile, Boudicia’s screams were losing their voice.

“Yoshi-kun…You played the guitar, right? And quite diligently, no less.”

I was bewildered. I never once told him about that. No, in fact, Boudicia is the only person who should know about that.

“It’s not something to be this shocked over. Looking at your short nails and solid fingertips, I had a hunch. Am I right? Please, you can call me *Detective* now.”

The way he spoke wasn’t different from usual, which was the most terrifying part about all of this. He seemed perfectly fine. Rational, even.

“And this arm is quite precious, isn’t it?”

“Stop…”

“Boo, you should know that more than anybody else.”

“…Don’t…”

“The pain of an artist who lost their arm, that is.”

“George! *Please*!”

Hearing this plea, George laughed.

“*Please*, you say? That’s my line. Or rather…would it be Yoshi-kun’s? Boo save me! I’m being attacked by a mad *Clown*! *Please*!”

He was fooling around with his tone, but I could tell. He was serious. George will do it. He will choose whatever method he deems necessary, and he won't hesitate. *For the greater good*, just like he said. As long as it meant that Boudicia would write again. He will do…what he must.

"Even if you do this…I can't write anymore."

"You can. Just be confident in yourself. Grab that backpack and stand on the pedestal," he spoke with a gentle tone.

Like he was trying to give courage to his child. Like a teacher slowly teaching a student. Boudicia slowly picked up the backpack. And while staggering, she slowly approached the pedestal.

"*Good girl*," George praised her while his knife remained stabbed into my arm.

While my consciousness was getting close to blanking out from the pain, I thought to myself. Isn't this…a good thing? Sacrificing the writers at the Bearpit to corner Boudicia is absolutely vile. However, at this point…it's all in the past. It's not just George, either. Aeon, Lara, and many other people wished for her to write again. And…I'm no exception. Using her arm in the argument is just an excuse. That's what George said. And I can't deny that. I managed to play the guitar for her. Making something move that once stopped…it's too difficult. But at the same time…Once something starts moving again, the rest is simple.

What Boudicia needs right now is a reason. Something that…might even force her to write. And assuming that was me right now…Then, in the end, George and I are wishing for the same thing. We want Boudicia to write. Other than the knife stabbed in my arm, we are the same.

Then, Boudicia stopped her backpack on the ground. In her right hand, she held a spray can. And yet, I could tell even from here. Her grasp was weak, her hand quivering.

"Now, Boudicia. Write."

If I told her to write, would she do it for me? If I begged her…asked her to help me…Because then…I was tempted for a moment, about to open my mouth, when I saw it. As she held the spray can with a shaking hand…a single tear ran down her cheek.

“Write! Now!”

George’s voice called me back to reality. No, this isn’t what I want.

“Boo-san!” I screamed.

As loud as possible to ensure she could hear me. Then, she turned around. There was no sight of the prideful lion I knew. Nor was she as free as a stray cat. She was just…terrified. Like a kitten locked inside a box.

“…*Do not write*.” I slowly but decisively pronounced a single English sentence.

And then, her eyes shot wide open.

“Yoshi-kun! What are you saying?! Don’t you want Boo to…”

“No…Not particularly, to be honest.”

The knife was still stabbed in my arm. And yet, the pain didn’t bother me much. Instead, I remembered something. Why was I so drawn to Boudicia? I didn’t really understand it…But, now I know. It’s because nobody can own her.

Dirtying the walls, ignoring the risk of being caught, and even getting involved with violence. A competition. Writing. The work then gets overwritten, or completely erased, and vanishes forever. It’s art that nobody truly wishes for—Graffiti. But, that’s exactly why…

“This isn’t like you, Boo-san.”

“Not…like me…” She looked at me, baffled.

A bit of light had returned to her blue eyes.

“You’re selfish, all over the place, and never listen to what other

people tell you. Isn't that right?"

I remembered the first time we met. That's why I was so attracted to her.

"I was always jealous of that. Doing something not for the sake of others, but just listening to your own heart…Your own soul. That's the Boo-san I admire."

I was always hurt. Being told that I have no soul, I was destroyed beyond repair. No matter how much I practiced, how much I studied, that one line made it feel like everything was erased. That I had nothing left inside of me. But…that was the right thing. Practicing to become better. Studying to write better songs. Eventually, I became able to just accept that. The problem was…what to do with all of that.

"But if I don't draw, then your arm…"

"None of that matters right now."

"It matters very much! You practiced so much for the sake of your music! If that's ruined, then for what reason did you…"

"Does everything have to have a reason?"

Even if there's nothing left…If your soul so wishes for it, then we all can do something new.

"…Yoshi-kun, I'm reaching the limit of my patience here."

I could tell that George put more strength into the rip he had on the knife. He'll do it, surely. However…

"George-san…You're not the only one who's serious about this."

I took a deep breath and prepared myself. And then—I opened up my arms outward.

"Guuuuh…!"

I couldn't hold myself from groaning. The knife dug deeper into my

arm. I could feel it grinding against my bones. The numbing pain was much greater than before. It hurt so much I just wanted to black out. But…this much is nothing. Having someone else deny my own music…was so much more painful. And right now…Boudicia is the one who's really hurting.

"Yoshi!"

"Yoshi-kun, what are you…"

Boudicia dropped the spray can in her hand. Meanwhile, George's grip grew weaker, and I broke free. The knife dropped to the ground, and blood came gushing out of my open wound. My consciousness was starting to waver, but I kept myself standing.

"…Please, don't write, Boo-san. Not right now."

I was staggering toward her. One step after the other. Because there was something I needed to tell her…Because there was something I had to say.

"Don't do it to win."

Like she had been in the past, only living to overwrite someone else's art.

"Don't do it for the sake of the town."

Like Lara would, only living to protect Bristol.

"Don't do it for the sake of history."

Like George asked her to, only wishing to remain in someone's memories.

"Don't do it for my sake."

I don't matter one bit. What's the point…if she'll just cry while looking at the graffiti? What's the point if the wild lion I had always admired would end up locked inside a cage? Right now, Boudicia still looked like a weakened kitten, who was thrown out by its owner. But…that's not the face. That's not why I began to admire you.

“If you…If you really wish to write graffiti again someday…”

I lowered my body and grabbed the spray can that had fallen to the ground. The silver can began to turn red. But, none of that mattered. As her translucent blue eyes looked at me, I faintly grabbed her hand. And then…slammed the spray can into her right hand.

“**Write for your own sake, Boudicia!”**

“Yoshi…I…”

She dropped her gaze down to the spray can, her face distorting. However, she quickly closed her mouth and looked up again. Seeing that, I knew that it hard returned—The sharp gaze of the prideful lion parading through the Savanna.

“…Well, you really caught me off-guard there. I truly didn’t expect that. I’m jealous of you, Yoshi-kun. Believe that.”

When I turned around, George picked up the knife and looked at the blade, still drenched by my blood. His voice was as calm as he laughed. However, the smile on his face had vanished.

“So…Roasted Beef-chan. Let’s hear your answer. Are you going to write?” He pointed the knife at Boudicia as he asked.

“I won’t.” She declared without hesitation. “George…I won’t draw for you.”

“That…is your answer?”

“That’s right. So get lost, your turn is over!”

Roaring laughter filled the museum. George shook his head as he laughed like he was told a joke, and then opened his arms with a shrug.

“Should you really be saying that to the childhood friend who went so far just to have you write again?!”

“…Oh, I know. You’ve always watched over me. And I’m thankful for that. But erasing the graffiti of Bristol…hurting other people…I can’t

accept you for that!"

"Oh, *I am sorry*, my dear Boo." He said with a smile. "Really, I thought this plan was progressing in the right direction. But, that was my last play. I have no more cards left…so I'll have to start from zero."

And then—his smile vanished.

"…After I get rid of you, Yoshi-kun."

Pointing the blade of the knife at us, George started running. But before I could get between them again, she took one step ahead of me.

"Georgeee!"

"Boudiciaaa!"

They roared at each other, which was silenced by an odd sound. It was like metal and metal clashed, followed by a small ball rattling. I know that sound. In her right hand, she held the spray can. As always, her grip was unsteady, the spray can about to fall out of her hand. However, she used her left hand to support that. She had pushed her right arm forward, pressing the spray paint with her left hand. The soul that inhabited her right arm…now was transferred into her left. Even after being hurt…experiencing loss, she won't drop it again. Her sharp gaze pierced George—as she pointed the spray can at him, holding it like a can.

"Go to hell, you parsley bastard!"

Together with that scream, a wave of spray paint gushed out of the can, covering George's face.

"Waaah?!"

His face had turned crimson red as he groaned. And then his knees gave in.

"…Let's stop this."

He probably ended up with spray in his eyes, as he held his head.

“You don’t like your own art, right? If so, you gotta write yourself. No matter how much you suck at it, how much it annoys you, you’re the only one who can overwrite yourself. Even if I write for you, it won’t change a damn thing.”

George didn’t answer. This…is the end.

“You really don’t get it…You don’t understand how I feel…!”

George squeezed these words out of him as he stood up once more. I do sympathize with George. As I was tormented by the same thing. From the arms George covered himself with, a sharp gaze flashed up. He readied his knife and approached us. He still hasn’t given up. I had a feeling this would happen, which is why I was ready. I moved between Boudicia and the knife, blocking it with my own body—Or, that’s what should have happened at least.

“I swear…Seeing this play out reminds me of something I’d rather have forgotten.”

Standing in front of me…wasn’t George. It was a tall back with chocolate-colored arms.

“…Aeon-san!”

“Sorry for the wait. Took me some time to get past police surveillance.

“Guh…!” George’s arm with the knife was grabbed by Aeon, not moving at all.

“Not my style, but it’s time we should steal the candy from the bad boy.” Aeon twisted George’s arm, and the knife dropped to the ground.

Following that, he restrained George with movement smooth as a river. I audibly gasped at the sight of a professional at work. At the same time, a pair of slender fingers picked up the knife next to George, as her accessories jingled.

“*Oh dear*. Not half bad of a knife. Though it probably wouldn’t help much while cooking,” she observed the knife as her beryl green hair swayed.

“Lara-san, you came too.”

“Why…are you here…?” George asked with a weak voice, as Lara put one hand on her hip.

“Boo’s in trouble, so of course I’d come running.”

“Ugh…But I had the police arrest you…!”

“Heh, don’t underestimate the Captain. Escaping from the confinement of the marine is *easy peasy lemon squeezy*. Aeon, punish our city council puppy.”

“*Aye, Ma’am.*”

Aeon grinned as he put George’s arms together, taking out a zip tie from his pockets, and putting it around George’s arms.

“…How did you know we were here?” George groaned as he asked.

“I made sure that the message you left at the Bearpit was readable for others, too. Though I was very nervous to actually write my own graffiti.”

I had a hunch that something on this scale might happen, so I made the necessary preparations before coming here. That being said, it was a pleasant surprise that Aeon could shake off the police and that Lara could escape her own confinement.

“Exactly. And with the entrance open, you probably didn’t expect us to come storming in, Mr. Strategist.”

Lara, Aeon, and now Boudicia. All these writers were now looking down at George.

“Grk…Boudicia, are you going to keep living without ever writing again?! Ruining the tremendous talent you old?!”

“The hell are you on about? I only said I’m not drawing for your sake.”

As George’s red face twisted in anger, I could hear a shrill sound in the distance. A siren that resembled a broken toy’s sound.

“The police, huh? Let’s get away from here.”

“If we get caught here, it’ll be all for nothing.”

Lara and Aeon headed for the entrance.

“Boudicia, come with us,” Aeon said.

“No, there’s something I gotta do first. You go ahead without me.”

Boudicia didn’t turn around and looked at the Paint Pot Angel.

“Boo…? What are you saying…?” Lara showed a worried tone, but Aeon grabbed her hand.

“…Judging from my experience, they’ll be here in four minutes.”

“I just need three,” Boudicia said and took out her red hoodie, wrapping it around her waist.

This revealed her white elbows, as well as her right elbow. Everybody could see the scar forming like lightning.

“Boudicia, you…”

Aeon spoke up but quickly cut off his words. He understood everything with just that.

“Let me ask one thing. Why do you write? What is the wall telling you?”

“Can’t know that without writing a thing. Aren’t you the same? That’s why we write.”

Aeon didn’t respond, but I could see a faint smile on his face.

“Let’s go, Lara.”

“But, Boo…” Lara’s worried gaze met mine, and I nodded.

She hesitated for a moment but quickly followed Aeon to leave. Now it was just Boudicia, George, and I left.

“All right.”

Boudicia pumped herself up, and I understood what she was going to do. That’s why I called out to her.

“It’s okay.”

“Yeah,” she showed me a gleaming smile.

I sat down next to George. My arm was still bleeding buckets, so standing was getting tough on me. I then looked at George. He had one eyebrow raised, as his arms and legs were restrained, showing a somewhat bewildered face. Seeing that made me snicker. He was someone who stabbed me with a knife not even minutes ago. We were attracted to the same person and wished for the same thing. And now, that wish is being granted. Boudicia got up the pedestal on the opposite side of the Paint Pot Angel. And then, I heard the rattling of the spray can.

As she did before, Boudicia held the can with both hands. Quickly and thoroughly, a shape appeared. Words were written on that previously empty space. Each time she moved the spray can, I could see the letters being imbued with life, almost jumping out at me. The predominant smell of paint, together with the sound of the can spray on the walls, now felt oddly comfortable. George and I just watched this in silence.

“Yoshi-kun.”

“Yes?”

George spoke up and I answered.

“Just what…was I lacking?” He said, as if he had forgotten the previous incident already.

However, when I saw his complex expression as he gazed at Boudicia

write, even I could let it pass. In the end, it was very simple. It's because George loves Boudicia.

"I don't think you lacked anything."

George looked at me in shock but quickly gazed back at Boudicia.

"A lion…is much more beautiful when he's in the wild. That's all there is to it."

Hearing my words, George laughed.

"I see. Yeah, you might be right."

And as we had this conversation, Boudicia added the final highlight of the graffiti. She threw the spray can into her backpack and opened her mouth.

"I'm done."

It was completely different from the graffiti that had begun to lose its color. Unlike the art that was filled with killing intent to the smallest stroke, this one was bold, yet simple. Even so, the letters written on the wall vibrated with life, like they would start dancing any second. And this graffiti consisted of a single line—**Here I'm allowed everything all of the time**.

"Yoshi, let's go!"

The sirens were closing in on us. We couldn't afford to take our time.

"C'mon," she offered me her right hand.

When I grabbed that hand, she held onto it and pulled me up. Even though we'd have to run away from the police after this, her expression seemed so calm and refreshed. We didn't exchange any words. We had the graffiti to look at, as that was all we needed. Boudicia turned around and ran toward the entrance. I chased after her when George called my name.

"Yoshi-kun!"

I turned around.

“One last thing,” he said with a saddened face. “You went to the Giant’s Cave, right? I think that…Goram actually lost against Ghyston on purpose.”

“What do you…”

“Yoshi, hurry!”

Before I could give his words any deeper thought, Boudicia grabbed my arm. And then we escaped from the art museum—leaving behind a single knife, a man, and a single piece of graffiti.

Advertisement

Epilogue: “Just with You”

One month has passed since that incident. After spending some time in the center street of Bristol, I headed to the location Boudicia and I agreed to meet up.

“Hello there, Ursa-san,” I greeted the black and white bear guarding the Bearpit.

Once, Boudicia laughed at me for doing so, but now it feels so nostalgic. It’s become something like my habit. Even as I headed down the stairs leading to the Bearpit, it had become as lively as it always was. And while admiring the graffiti to my left and right, I walked toward the plaza. The incident related to the graffiti here turned into a major happening for everybody involved, including me. The purge of the Bearpit and destruction of Ursa, as well as the city council’s measures against graffiti were put on ice since then. The citizens learned of the police’s intervention, as videos of this event spread across the internet, which resulted in the city council and aggressive police force being condemned.

The white walls of the Bearpit were quickly filled with graffiti once more, as regular life returned to Bristol. The sudden appearance at the Bristol Art Museum and Gallery caused a major uproar, which was reported across the whole UK. People speculated who could have done it, including the assumption that Banksy may have returned, as the people kept on talking about for weeks.

However, every writer living in Bristol knew…that the Ghost of Bristol worked to resist and obstruct the city council’s purge. The opinions regarding this graffiti were split in two: Critique for the graffiti appearing in a public institution like the art museum, and praise for a message that halted the radical purge of Bristol’s culture. The only thing that nobody argued about was the absolute beauty this simple graffiti held.

“Yo, Yoshi.”

“Hungry?”

A long neck and a round face appeared from the green bus.

“Ah, JF-san, Peni-san. I got somewhere to be today.”

“Daaaw, boring. I finished a new track so I was hoping you’d give it a listen.”

“That sounds quite enticing…Could you send me the data later?”

“Not happening. You gotta listen to it in person.”

“Somewhere to be? Ah, it must be a date!”

“In that case, we’ll have to mill Yoshi with the coffee mill.”

“Or turn him into a kebab, slowly cutting the meat off him.”

“I-I’m not on a date or anything! Anyway, I’ll see you later!”

From time to time, I would go drink some coffee at the Bearpit, or order myself a burrito when I was feeling hungry. Each time, Peni would recommend me a new burrito he came up with. Then JF would come in and tell Peni to work on his graffiti some more because that’s what makes him this fat, as he brings me a coffee. Whenever that happens, I talk about music a bit. Thanks to JF’s recommendations I learned about Massive Attack or Portishead, who are famous bands here in Bristol. Whenever I hear the breakbeats mixed with a calm melody, I’m once again reminded of the beauty of Bristol.

“*Oh dear*, if it isn’t Yoshi.”

“Ah, Lara-san.”

On the opposite side of the Bearpit entrance, I ran into Lara, who just finished spraying something on the wall.

“A new work of yours?”

“Someone wrote a tag on top of a piece, so I’m punishing them,” she

said as she shook her spray can with a beryl green color.

“Guess you’ve got your work cut out for you, Captain.”

“Tell me about it. I wonder if there isn’t any reliable crew member who’d help me clean and swear absolute allegiance to me?”

“I’m not part of your crew, nor am I a writer…”

“My, but you might have talent if you try it yourself?”

“That joke isn’t funny.”

“More importantly, how’s Boo doing? Is she wearing the clothes I gave her? She’s not showing herself at all…That’s not what we promised!”

“Ah, that…Well…It was a bit too…much, I guess? But, she was happy.”

“What a blatant lie! Well, it can’t be helped. I’ll take her to a shop with me next time. And of course, you’ll be joining me, Yoshi. Boo might be an exception, but you should learn about the beauty of fashion yourself. For example, we should do something about those glasses of yours.”

Whenever I happen to run into Lara, she always goes on a tangent like this. The reason that the city council loosened its strictness with the Bearpit’s graffiti was regarded as the Captain Lara’s result, as she’s been acquiring more and more fame. Since George’s betrayal led to this situation, she did feel guilty about it but continued to do her thing.

“…You agree with me, right Aeon?”

“I’m not as obsessed with clothing, in fact,” Aeon showed a wry smile as he crossed his arms and gazed at the graffiti next to Lara.

It felt like his arms had gotten even thicker compared to before. I heard that the police’s supervision of Aeon had gotten wishy-washy, too. And the sale of spray paint was opened up again. Since he returned to his graffiti work, he would often complain that people

lack practice and experience. The only difference compared to before is that he would sometimes show up here at the Bearpit, or draw his own art on a canvas. It even had a hint of calligraphy mixed into it, which was highly valued by the gallery. He's probably trying to find a new reason to write.

Either way, I said goodbye to these two and left the Bearpit, heading along Rupert Street. Along the road, some people were having picnics at College Green, and when I looked across the street to gaze at the Bristol City Office, I was reminded of George. I don't know the exact details of what happened to him after that incident. He stopped showing up at the shop and hasn't been in contact with me since. In fact, he hasn't committed any felonies. All he did was stab my arm, but everything else was indirect involvement. In a way, that was still very much like George.

When the police came to the museum, they must have found George looking like that, assuming he was attacked by somebody. According to Boudicia, he'll eventually show up at the shop again as if nothing happened. I honestly felt the same way, and I could see myself talking to him normally if that were the case.

Granted, the wound on my arm was fairly deep and cost me a lot of blood, but according to the doctor, you'd usually slice someone's arm with a knife like that vertically, but it was a miracle that no muscles or nerves got injured in the process. As a result of that, I'd be dealing with the pain for a while longer, but no long-lasting or severe aftereffects will remain. When I heard that, I had to question George's intentions. He did stab me. That was an undeniable fact, but the reason my wound ended up so deep is that I basically stabbed myself in the end. How serious…was George really?

The following day after the art museum incident, I made up my mind and sent my vocalist a message. That I was in a city called Bristol, where I encountered graffiti and the many writers who created it. And that something massive happened because of it. I wanted to keep it a brief report, but couldn't stop myself mid-way. And after all that, I added a comment, saying that once I return to Japan, I wouldn't mind playing in a band again. The response to that came back quicker than I thought. Three simple words, nothing more.

[Not gonna wait.]

There were two ways to interpret this. Either, they'd just kick me out of the band and continue. Or maybe…Oh, well. Reading that, I felt easier. There was nothing to get anxious over. I have all the time in the world. I can always return to being a beginner. It all depends on what I want to do. Searching endlessly for the answer is pointless because I'll take my path eventually. Not under anybody else's orders, but because I choose to do so. If there really was something a soul, then it'll surely wait for me up ahead.

Passing College Green, I walked along the river. With the circular aquarium and the glass-ridden science museum at my side, I headed down Anchor Road. I've walked this path once before, so I won't get lost again. Eventually, I entered a side path from Lower Ram Street, revealing a narrow passage surrounded by brick walls and joined commodities. At the very end was a dead end—where she stood.

"Sorry, did you wait long?"

"You're so slow. The clocks of you Japanese folks are so meticulous, eh?"

"I'm still on time. You British just have messed up clocks. Do they work based on steam?"

"Hah. Time marches on so we're living in the future."

I returned sarcasm with sarcasm, when Boudicia grumbled excuse after excuse, yet seemed fairly happy. Even after what happened at the museum, she hadn't written any new graffiti since. She just sat on her chair at the 8-Bit World, watching me clean the shop as she yawned. I would be lying if I said I wasn't a bit excited to see her return, but I was also the one who said she should write for her own sake. Because this is something she has to decide for herself. That's what I thought, but when I heard that we'd meet up here, I was surprised.

I looked up at the brick wall. There was the lion drawing I had seen so many times. It's Boudicia's way of life, only aiming for victory. Before, it emitted pressure unbelievable to have been created by

spray. Even the absolute hostility and ferocity were unlike anything else…But now, it felt different.

"…I told you I hated this drawing, right?"

"Yes."

"I was thinking of overwriting it today." She said and put down her backpack.

I had a feeling, but even so…I was surprised. Because she—

"…Um."

"What?"

"I might ask you something rude now, so please don't get angry."

"You really think of me as some wild animal, right? Pisses me off."

"Don't get angry before I even get to ask my answer."

"It's your fault for acting rude before asking the question. I'm not angry. I'm not some wild beast. I'm a beauty."

"Huh?"

"Don't 'Huh?' me. I'll roll you up into sushi and have you get run over on the Great Western Railway."

"Your reaction is the exact opposite of what a true beauty would do."

"Enough about that! Ask me! I'm curious now!"

I sighed faintly, made up my mind, and asked.

"…Can you write?"

"Who do you take me for? I wouldn't have come here if I can't," Boudicia said, sounding extremely confident. "What do you think I've been doing the past month?"

"I don't know?"

“Why?!”

“Because you never said a thing.”

Boudicia heard my response and thought about it.

“…Guess so.”

“Indeed.”

Whatever it may be, he always lacked the words when it mattered. Looking at her reaction, she wasn’t even aware of that fact. I swear, these stray cats require so much attention…Then again, it’s because she’s a stray cat. And of course, that short exchange made it obvious what she was doing the past month.

“Yoshi.”

“Yes.”

“…Are you angry?” She leaned over to look at my face.

Her complicated expression made my heart skip a beat, but I looked away so she wouldn’t find out.

“I’m not angry. It’s just…”

“It’s just…”

“I wish you’d told me.”

Even if I had known that she was secretly going through this recovery, there wouldn’t have been something I could have done for her. But through meeting her, learning more about graffiti, and everything else…It’s thanks to her that I could properly face my own music again. That’s why I wanted to help her, too. Even if it wasn’t anything to write home about.

“That’s…Well…Um…”

“Yes?”

“I wanted to make it a *surprise*!”

Because of a reason I hadn't expected in a million years, I had to take a few seconds to register what she even just said…and then burst out laughing.

"Ah, you shit! Why are you laughing?! Gaah, I shouldn't have told you after all…!"

"I'm sorry." I wiped my tears and apologized.

I wasn't laughing simply because I saw it as funny. I was genuinely… happy.

"Geez! Whatever! You just watch! Ah, but get back a bit. You might get sprayed, too."

I followed her orders, as she took out a spray can and aggressively shook it with her left hand. The metal ball inside clicked and clacked as she did so when she held the spray can in her left hand. It's obvious that she wasn't fully back in her prime, but I can tell she practiced. She accepted what she had lost, but kept her soul burning. And with what she has right now, she chose to write.

"I'm doing it."

"Yes."

"I'm gonna write now."

"Please do."

"I swear I'll do it."

"Boo-san."

"What?"

"You're nervous, aren't you?"

"…Just a bit. This wall is fresh, after all."

I don't blame her. The graffiti in the art museum was a special case. And that was one month ago. The last time she wrote before that was

probably the day her arm was stabbed. However…

“It’s okay.”

“…I know.”

Right now, she was smiling. She looked at the wall ahead of her, readied the spy can, and pressed the nozzle. Once she started, everything went by fast. I thought she was going for a simple tag, but it surpassed a slow-up, showing intentions of turning this into a masterpiece. She used her full body, switching between spray cans, as she brought shape to the graffiti. At first, it simply looked like the trails of spray paint, but adding more colors and changing the writing, it gave new meaning to it.

I watched this unfold when I was reminded of George once more. ‘I think that…Goram actually lost against Ghyston on purpose.’ It was a phrase that threw me for a loop. Why would he say that at the very end? Lost on purpose? Who…against who? It felt so vague when the dots suddenly connected. Two giants…and one princess. Maybe he had anticipated even this very moment where I would watch over Boudicia as she writes a new graffiti?

Then again, I have no way of confirming that, and there’s most likely nothing to gain from doing so either way. All that matters is that she’s writing graffiti again. That’s all that should matter. To me…as well as to George.

“*Done*.”

Boudicia’s voice pulled me back to reality. She stuffed that spray can she held in her bag and moved away a bit to stand next to me. And together, we observed the finished graffiti. Fresh colors I hadn’t seen before jumped right into my eyes. Compared to the gloomy graffiti from before, you wouldn’t think it was written by the same person. Strokes moved to the sides, up and down, as they changed into a shape and created an image. It wasn’t particularly detailed, but also not rough either. All because she still lacked full control…But that’s exactly why it felt so free and beautiful.

“…Ah, crap. Forgot my sign.” She said and took out a spray can filled

with white paint, drawing a small ghost in the corner.

I glanced at her profile while she did so. It's been only a month since she was drawing with her left arm. It's far from perfect, but her expression as she looked at her graffiti…seemed satisfied.

"*Surprised?*"

"*Amazing*."

I said so from the bottom of my heart. The fact that she could draw this well was one part of it, but even more so…Being able to draw in such a cheerful and refreshing manner was an unexpected change.

"Hey, Yoshi."

"Yes?"

"Why do you think we're even doing this?" Boudicia asked as she looked at the graffiti. "We write on the walls, get overwritten, and have our work erased. Nobody asked us to do this, and we're just being hurt in the process. For what reason are we writing?"

"…Good question."

This world might even be better off without graffiti. And it's not just graffiti. People could survive without music. We are attracted to things and objects that aren't needed by this world, wasting our lives away. Why, indeed? When I had just met Boudicia, I surely would not have been able to answer that.

But now…I feel like I understand. Even if nobody wishes for it, we'll continue to birth new creations. And then, both she and I will change. We change ourselves each and every single day, improving

by doing so. Sometimes, we may run into a tall wall that keeps us stuck, but we'll never truly be complete. And…that's probably for the better.

We're just like graffiti. Sooner or later, we'll use up our life and vanish. But even so…No, exactly because of that, we continue to change. Not for anybody else's sake. Not to win, either. To become something we consider beautiful. That's why…we overwrite. Ourselves—and the world. So if she asks me for the reason, then…

"Because we're alive, I guess?"

"…Yeah. That makes sense." Her golden hair swayed as she smiled.

And looking at her, I was forced to admire that beauty. However, this beauty only lasts for a moment. Only visible when she writes something that truly satisfies her. It's a fleeting appearance only I get to see. And that exactly—**is the Ghost of Bristol to me**.

"Maaan, all this working hard and drawing has me starving. Still can't move it as much as I'd like." She stretched her arms and grabbed the backpack from the ground. "It's just noon, so how about we, well, grab a bite?"

"Sounds good. What do we eat?"

"Meat!"

"So abstract…Oh, right. When I went to the river with Lara-san the other day, I found a restaurant that looked great."

"Huh?"

"Ah."

"Hold on, I wasn't informed of that."

"Um, well, there were certain circumstances…"

"Hmph. Whatever, just go with Lara then."

"A-Ah, oh, come on! Wait for me!"

“*Never*!”

I desperately chased after Boudicia, who ran away. The graffiti on the wall behind us was hit by the pleasant sunlight, shining in a refreshing radiance.

OVERWRITE: THE GHOST OF BRISTOL

THE END.

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Afterword

Nice to meet you, I'm Ikeda Akiya, and I'm the person who wrote this novel.

From 2018 to 2019, I lived in UK Bristol myself. The experiences and sights I witnessed there are what gave life to this novel. Many places exist in reality, with their respective graffiti, and the purge of the Bearpit is something I even saw myself. Surely, Boudicia, Yoshi, Lara, Aeon, and George live somewhere here. If you're ever in Bristol, maybe you can even find them.

I received a lot of help in finishing this novel. First, if the dear judges from the Dengeki Prize committee had not given this novel such a high evaluation, it would have never seen the light of day. Following that, my two editors helped me, who didn't know left from right, in my writing process, giving me passionate advice at every corner. Needless to say, the colleagues I got to know during the selection of this 26th Prize were all very kind to me. My illustrator Mirea-san breathed life into these characters with their fashionable illustrations, paired with the wonderful visuals by my designer, who helped in deepening the worldview of this novel. Of course, there were many more people who helped in distributing and making this novel available. Thank you so much to everyone.

Before I bring this to an end, please let me give my personal thanks. First, my good friend Muratani Yukari, who I've known for 20 years now, debuted one step ahead of me at the 25th Dengeki Prize. You deserve my special gratitude. I was able to debut like this because I chased after your back, and the day we shook hands at the award ceremony is something I will never forget for the rest of my life. Next, a good friend of mine who was in a band with me, Miyashita Yuu. If not for your advice, I wouldn't have made it this far. I also have to mention my friends who indulged in the world of toys together with me. My imagination was sharpened greatly thanks to us

playing Diaclone, Microman, and Transformers. I'll be needing your strength again to learn more about the world like that, so I am counting on your support.

Of course, I cannot forget my family and friends who read my novel, as well as my beautiful wife and daughter that I'll be spending the rest of my days. And of course, I need to pay my respect to the city of Bristol and all the graffiti writers there. This novel was born from your graffiti culture. And I would be delighted if more people learned about the greatness of graffiti, its beauty, and the respect it deserves.

Just like all graffiti, or possibly even art in total, this novel will one day be overwritten. And I wish to accomplish that by creating an even greater story while borrowing the strength of the people by my side.

Finally…To you, who is reading this right now. Let's meet again someday, at a new wall, with another drawing.

See you later, alligator!

Ikeda Akiya

Boo
ブーディシア
Author's Comment
故郷から遠く離れたブリストルで、まさか自分と同じくギターを演奏する友達ができて、しかもレトロゲームで遊ぶことになるとは！　ヨシくんがたまたま日本人でなければ、グラフィティについてこんなに深く考えることはなかったし、一連の事件について知ることもなかったでしょう。今回の物語には出せませんでしたが、連れて行ってくれたライブハウスの様子や、彼の音楽活動についてなども、いずれ書いてみたいと思います。
Yoshi
ヨシ
Author's Comment
ブリストルの路地裏で、真剣な面持ちでグラフィティを書いている彼女に話しかけるのは、相当な勇気がいりました。最初はかなり警戒されましたが、僕が「日本人で小説を書いている」と伝えると、「日本人の友達がいる」と言ってヨシくんを紹介してくれました。思えばあのとき、すべてが始まった。スニーカーにはこだわりがあるらしく、彼女が実際履いていたモデルとカラーを指定して、イラストレーターさんに描いてもらいました。

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Credits

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Table of Contents

1. Illustrations
2. Prologue: “On The Wall”
3. Chapter 1: “To The Pit”
4. Chapter 2: “For the Captain”
5. Chapter 3: “Over The Bridge”
6. Chapter 4: “From the Stage”
7. Chapter 5: “By the Angel”
8. Epilogue: “Just with You”
9. Afterword
10. Credits